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POOR HUMANITY.

VOL. II.



POOR HUMANITY.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"NO CHURCH;" "CHRISTIE'S FAITH;"

"MATTIE, A STRAY," ETC.

"Such is humanity."—WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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CONTENTS.

BOOK II.—THE BETTER LIFE (*Continued*).

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH.

	PAGE
THE RECTOR'S HOME	1

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH.

IN THE GARDEN	18
-------------------------	----

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH.

HORACE ESSENDEN IS WARNED	33
-------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH.

MR. GEORGE HEWITT IN A NEW LIGHT	42
--	----

CHAPTER THE FIFTEENTH.

PAUL DOES NOT IMPROVE	55
---------------------------------	----

CHAPTER THE SIXTEENTH.	
	PAGE
THE HARVEST FEAST	66
CHAPTER THE SEVENTEENTH.	
"ONE MORE OF THEM"	87
CHAPTER THE EIGHTEENTH.	
UNDER THE ELMS	99
CHAPTER THE NINETEENTH.	
TRUE TO HER SCHOOL	113
CHAPTER THE TWENTIETH.	
THE FIRST SURPRISE	128
CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIRST.	
A TROUBLED MIND	147
CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SECOND.	
A LITTLE EXPLANATION	159
CHAPTER THE TWENTY-THIRD.	
AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE	171
CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FOURTH.	
PAUL PACKS UP HIS BOX	189

CONTENTS.

vii

BOOK III.—CAST BACK.

CHAPTER THE FIRST.

	PAGE
AT LAST	202

CHAPTER THE SECOND.

THE WORST OF NEWS	220
-----------------------------	-----

CHAPTER THE THIRD.

KLISTON ASSIZES	242
---------------------------	-----

CHAPTER THE FOURTH.

AT HIS WORST	256
------------------------	-----

CHAPTER THE FIFTH.

VATES STREET	272
------------------------	-----

CHAPTER THE SIXTH.

MRS. WISBY MAKES HER LAST CONFESSION	285
--	-----

BOOK IV.—THE CRISIS.

CHAPTER THE FIRST.

THE DEEPENING OF THE SHADOW	304
---------------------------------------	-----



POOR HUMANITY.

BOOK II.—THE BETTER LIFE (*Continued*).

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH.

THE RECTOR'S HOME.

ON that particular Saturday night wherein much action had occurred, and a great deal had arisen to trouble the mind of George Hewitt, farmer, the Reverend Theobald Gifford and his wife sat together in their drawing-room. Dinner was over, the daylight lingered yet in the garden ground without, and the rector had not rung for lights, although time was valuable to him, and he had many thoughts to collect together before the morrow's sermon was written. The reader may not have forgotten that it was a habit of Mr. Gifford's in old days to compose one of his sermons on a Saturday night, and that habit had clung to him in his newer and happier estate.

As a rule, he was very punctual as to the time for

VOL. II. B

beginning his sermon, leaving the dinner-table regularly at half-past seven, and keeping to his study till ten or half-past ten, the latter being the more common hour at which he wrote his last words and locked them in his desk. But on the evening to which it is our task to direct the reader's attention the Reverend Theobald Gifford remained in his drawing-room long after his pretty wife had poured him out his tea and he had partaken of it; he was happy and comfortable there, and, despite his natural zeal, even the composition of a sermon appeared to be in the way of his thorough enjoyment.

Miss Gifford had not dined with them; and, although we would not hint that her absence had rendered matters more pleasant in any way, still it was a little strange that he liked his Saturday nights, when company was not likely to approach him, better than the rest of the week put together. He was a man who had never cared for company, and had shunned it as much as possible; and since his marriage Augusta had become further removed from him, and was at times inclined to be set down as company herself. Augusta Gifford was a sensible girl, and did not accept her brother's invitation to live with him after his marriage with Miss Masdale, late of Wilton. She had never been deeply attached to Miss Masdale, or Miss Masdale to

her. She had thought Miss Masdale in her maiden days frivolous, and not wholly free from affectation ; and though her loyalty to all who bore the name of Gifford would not allow her to think disparagingly of any one whom her brother had taken to wife, though she did her best to love her as a sister, still she felt that she was better apart from the new home—as are all relations, even mothers-in-law, we are told, if universal harmony be the desideratum.

But Augusta was too devoted to her brother Theo to live far away from him, and in Devonshire, where he had married, and now at Deeneford, where he was settled, there had been found a little villa, within a stone's throw of him, that was suitable for her and her modest requirements until the day of her own marriage should come round in due course. A dull life for her this might have been had she been inclined to become a dull woman ; but she was always cheerful, bright, and busy, and there was the village to look up, and village people to call upon, when it struck her that brother Theo, or brother Theo's wife, had had a little too much of her society. She generally dined with Theo five days out of the seven—it was by his express desire, and when he desired anything expressly he was sure to have his way, being a decisive man—and on those days Horace Essenden came courting at the rectory, and made

time pass pleasantly. On the Saturdays and Sundays both Theo and his sister were each exclusive after his and her way, and it was not till Monday came round that the family were united again.

On this Saturday night Mr. and Mrs. Gifford were alone, then. The baby had been put to bed by the nurse, after much careful examination by the father, whose private opinion was that it was the finest boy he had ever seen in his life; and there was this married couple—a young married couple still, we may say, despite Mr. Gifford being seven-and-thirty, and eleven years the senior of his wife—talking together of the events of the past week, and one of them forgetful of the time that would be left him for his sermon, unless he worked later into the night than was his ordinary rule.

“What a happy day this has been,” he said at last, “and yet there has been nothing out of the common in it, Laura, that I can see.”

“Perhaps it is because you have seen more of me,” she said archly, “had me more to myself, Theo.”

“Well, that is not unlikely,” was his reply; “and yet that is scarcely fair on Augusta, whom we are always glad to see, and whose coming seems to do us always so much good.”

Of a jealous nature, perhaps, the young wife of

the staid rector of Deeneford, for she said half pettishly—

“I don’t see exactly the good she does—but then we are so good already, Theo.”

“Yes, my dear, I hope we are,” he answered with great gravity; “at all events, we try to walk as uprightly as we can. You and I are one, and self-praise is no recommendation, but we can speak well behind the back of her, for she really is one of the best of women—unselfish, truthful, devout, with only the one fault of thinking that her opinion should be taken in preference to mine, and of that she appears to be breaking herself gradually. Did I ever tell you that we nearly quarrelled about a girl in whom she had great confidence, and I had not?”

“Yes, I think I have heard that story,” replied Laura. “Augusta was hard to convince—she always is a little too firm, I fancy.”

“Can a man or woman be too firm, Laura?”

“A woman can; it is not natural that she should be as hard and inflexible as you men. Allowance should always be made for her weakness, her vanity, her kindness of heart, that may lead her to say something of which she hereafter repents; but yet,” she added thoughtfully, “which has been said all the same.”

“We should not judge too hastily, of course,” said

Mr. Gifford, "and there are many weak women whom we can afford to pity at all times—too many, whom heaven help and watch over."

"Amen," said Mrs. Gifford, with a suddenness that startled her husband.

"My dear," he asked anxiously, "you have not heard of anything serious in the village—you do not know any one very weak, perhaps very much tempted, to whom my advice can be of service?"

"No, dear, no."

"Has Augusta said anything? She was round the village yesterday, and something might have struck her as peculiar."

"Oh, you think of nothing but Augusta," cried Mrs. Gifford; "whatever the subject, that girl comes into the foreground, and takes the foremost place!"

Mr. Gifford looked serious for a moment.

"In my heart, Laura, she has the foremost place but one."

Laura brightened up at this compliment—she was a woman fond of compliments at all times, and this came from a truthful man, and was naturally to be appreciated.

"You are forgetting the baby now."

"To be sure I am. I beg your pardon and baby's also, Laura. The foremost place but two, Augusta, then."

"How affections change, Theo."

"No, they don't change. I love Augusta as well as ever, only you are of course before her, just as Horace Essenden has stepped before me in her estimation, without my losing ground, I'm sure. The heart, my dear, has room for all who deserve a place there."

"I don't think she loves Mr. Essenden very much, Theo," said his wife; "that is," noticing her husband's wondering stare, "she does not appear to be desperately in love with him."

"Desperately in love—what an odd phrase!"

"You know what I mean, Theo," said Mrs. Gifford, speaking quickly, and proceeding with her fancy work very quickly too; "she is always very self-possessed and cool and grave, not anxious to show even the favoured one how intense is her affection for him."

"Precisely; and I see a great deal to admire in Augusta for that," he answered. "She knows that Horace is the man of her choice, and she loves him, and has trust in him. Of course she is not feverish, jealous, or so extravagant in her affection that it verges on an earthly worship, that lowers her and him; but she loves him none the less for that."

"She appears to me a woman who could give him

up with great complacency—whose heart would not break at the loss of him.”

“If he were unworthy of her—and that could be the only reason for a separation—she would not grieve much, I dare say.”

“A woman should not measure her grief by the extent of her lover’s unworthiness, Theobald,—she would grieve just as bitterly for a villain as a hero, if she had loved him very deeply.”

“My dear, how excitable you are to-night,” said Mr. Gifford. “I—I scarcely understand you. You know how well those two love each other, and what a happy match it is likely to be.”

“Ye—yes; but I still think Augusta is cold towards him. Why should she seek to disguise her attachment?”

“She does not disguise it, Laura, even if she call not upon the world to witness how fond she is of Horace Essenden. She and I are both of an undemonstrative school, but we feel none the less acutely when our hearts are touched.”

He let his hand rest fondly on her head for a moment, and the fair head bowed itself as if away from him. He was quick to see this.

“I do not reproach you, Laura, in any way, for judging of love after your own standard,” he said. “You were differently trained to Gus; have read a

great many novels, which are the confectionery of literature, not the solid food, remember; and perhaps the unreality, the stageyness of half the heroes and heroines you have known, may have led you to think that the courtship of the Giffords has been somewhat matter-of-fact and cold. But we know when we love, and we never break our words."

She drew a long breath and looked upwards at him with a strange, scared expression, which puzzled him a little.

"Have you really nothing to tell me, Laura?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing, Theo—nothing. Whatever made you think I had?"

"I don't know. One of my fancies, perhaps."

"There, don't let fancies get possession of you, especially at this time of night, with the sermon for to-morrow evening to write," she urged. "I am the fanciful one, not you—always. And always, Theo, make allowance for the weakness, the childishness of my nature—the worldly training I had before we knew each other—when inclined to judge too harshly of me."

"My dear Laura, am I likely ever to judge you harshly? This is a strange mood—you are not well. I will preach extempore to-morrow, and then I need not leave you to-night."

"Pray leave me, dear : I shall be better alone."

"Shall I escort you across to Augusta before I go up-stairs?"

"No, thank you," she replied more firmly. "If I am dull—which I shall not be now—I will go into the nursery."

He still hesitated until he was convinced that his wife was more like her usual self, and then he rang for lights in the drawing-room, kissed Laura, and departed.

The reader who remembers Theobald Gifford at Wilton, his crotchety, hard manner with the companion that he had there, his restlessness and fidgetiness over anything and everything, can see the great improvement that the marriage estate has effected in him. To his wife he was the Theobald Gifford that nature intended—generous, confiding, and kind, inclined to give way in those little arguments in which he occasionally indulged, and to allow for many things in her which he would not have spared in the rest of the community. To the world beyond his home he was the same man we have always known ; anxious to do good, always energetic and pious, but cold and unsympathetic—even suspicious—in his ministrings, and not winning many hearts towards him. It was possible that Laura Gifford regarded him from the latter point of

view, and was afraid of him at times, or she might have trusted in him more and done herself no harm.

For, be it recorded here, she trusted him not at all. The story of which she had been the heroine, and which we have heard related by Horace Essenden to his brother, he had never heard—had never dreamed of. He had believed in Laura's love for him, and it was as well, she thought, now that they were married, and explanations would only mar the harmony of their social system, that he should know nothing of her girl's romance. She could not relate it as a pleasant jest, at which he might be taught to smile, for she had loved this Horace Essenden deeply and passionately, and there had been jealousy and pique on her side, as well as much pressure from a prudent mother, when she accepted the minister for a husband, and threw over the dreamy poet with whom she might have been happy. We say might have been, for it was, after all, doubtful if Laura Gifford would have been really happy with any one, especially with so poor a husband as a few years back Horace would have made her. But she was inclined to think now that she would have been very happy with Horace Essenden, which was a dangerous thought to foster—which she did not try with all her power to crush under foot, as a thing of evil that might grow upon her. She was, trying, cer-

tainly, but that good-looking, weak-minded, well-intentioned man of excellent sentiments, but vague principles, she saw now almost daily.

Given the clue to the troubles of Mrs. Gifford—troubles that so verged on romance, that they were not wholly painful—and the chain of events is not difficult to follow from her marriage-day to this time. She was inordinately vain—vain of herself and her attractions; conscious that she was very pretty, and that her manners were pleasing and showy, and won upon most people with whom she came in contact. When she heard in Devonshire that Horace Essenden had proposed to Augusta Gifford, she was as hurt as though she was still free to marry him; she could not realise that he had forgotten her, that he was not going to sorrow for her, like one of Byron's heroes, until the end of time. She could have forgiven him any amount of dissipation, and set it down to the madness of despair; his misanthropy had been charming, and the ravings against the sex in his poems had all been flattering to her; but to fall in love a second time was a blow to her morbid vanity. She had been doubtful if Horace really loved her sister-in-law, and had become curious to test her power over him; and so, step by step, unto this miserable complication, which threatened now grave consequences. She had meant no harm, there

was no harm in her thoughts, on the contrary, some good resolutions coming uppermost. She was not certain if Horace Essenden did not always appear miserably small by comparison with her high-minded husband ; but she was secretly proud of the man loving her—of being almost ready to sacrifice everything for her.

A pitiable character to analyse, this—an outline figure of our story, but necessary, nevertheless, for its development : a specimen of that poor humanity over which moralists mourn, and philosophy is at fault—that poor humanity which builds its own sorrows, and then rails against the fate which has encompassed it.

Mrs. Gifford had promised not to be dull any more that evening, but when the wax lights were on the table she had a good cry to herself, and would have felt all the better for it, had it not been for the new trouble which beset her concerning her eyes being red and swollen, and herself “ quite a figure,” if Mr. Gifford’s anxiety should bring him from his study to the drawing-room again. She stole softly to her dressing-room to bathe her eyes, and render herself generally presentable, and spent an hour looking sadly at herself in the glass afterwards—a study that would have very much astonished Mr. Gifford had he strolled into her room. She broke

down suddenly in this study, and cried once more hysterically, burying her face in her lace handkerchief, lest the sounds should well from that room into the passage without; and then, half-an-hour afterwards, calm and self-possessed, she strayed into the nursery to look at little Theo quietly sleeping in his crib, oblivious to his mother's troubles.

It was striking ten when she went down-stairs, listening first at her husband's study door, and shuddering at his deep-voiced soliloquies as though it was the muttering of a maniac that affrighted her. Then she sent all the servants to their beds, and waited patiently for her husband's reappearance, recommencing that fancy work from which her thoughts had been seriously distracted that evening.

She must have thought more of her husband than of Horace Essenden after that, for as the minutes sped on she grew nervous concerning the time the Reverend Theobald was spending over his composition, and even gave voice to the following remark—

“I wish that he would finish his sermon and come down.”

She was not happy by herself—a restless woman, whose own society was far from agreeable to her. She set aside her work, drew up the blind, pushed

back the French window, and looked out. The night was dark, although the sky was full of stars, and the faint breeze astir that night scarcely moved the lace curtains in the room.

"How hot it is here!" she murmured. "I wonder if Theo has gone to sleep in his study?" Then she made one step towards the lawn, drew back again and hesitated, as a thought stole to her mind and arrested her progress.

"No, no; he promised not to come; I have his word," she said. Then, with this new assurance to render her composed in mind, she hastily twisted her handkerchief round her throat, and passed into the garden. She went swiftly across the lawn to the strip of gravel path beyond, whence she could obtain a full view of the study window, and so assure herself of her husband's application to his work. Yes, he was there still; the blind was undrawn, the window was open, and she could see him in his room bending over his writing, and writing very rapidly. With the full glare of the light upon it, it was a studious, earnest, even a handsome face, and she clasped her hands together as she watched, and wrung them silently and passionately

Yes, she would make him a good wife yet, she thought; the past was not so black a one between them. She was coming to herself, and heretofore

she had verged on dreamland, with strange dream-figures hovering about her. She had felt miserable—intensely miserable until that hour, for she had exacted a promise from Horace to forget her, to do his best to love Augusta, and make her a good husband, and the romance was dying out and leaving her a matter-of-fact, despondent woman; but now she believed that she should be happy in time, and that Horace would be nothing more to her than a mere acquaintance, whom she could meet without one extra heart-throb. An intensely penitent woman, whilst the mood lasted, and ever painting her own weakness—her sickly sentimentalism with her first lover—in colours darker and deeper than there was, perhaps, occasion for—just as on other occasions she would extenuate too much, and lay all the blame to her match-making mother, to Horace, to Theobald Gifford, to any one save her own weak, impulsive, extraordinary self.

“Heaven forgive me trifling with so serious a question; looking away for a moment from responsibilities so grave and sacred as belong to him and his,” she said, with a gesture almost melo-dramatic towards the window as she spoke. “I am young still, and he has faith in me, and great love for me. Yes, Theo, I will forget everything but you.”

At that very instant a hand touched her shoulder, and a voice addressed her by that name which only the one man above there had a right to call her now.

“Laura, forgive me, but I could not keep away.”

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH.

IN THE GARDEN.

THE minister's wife suppressed a cry of alarm at the sudden appearance of Horace Essenden at her side, and then, dashing away his hand from her arm, moved towards the drawing-room.

"Laura, you will not leave me like this. I have much to tell you, much to explain, much to warn you of," he cried.

"Hush, sir," cried Mrs. Gifford. "Do you wish to be heard, and to stab his heart as well as mine? You have broken your word with me, you are no longer to be trusted."

"Forgive me, but I was obliged to come, for your own safety, not for mine."

"What do you mean?"

It was her first hesitation; but then it was for her own safety, he said, and she was naturally a selfish woman.

They moved away from the light thrown upon the

lawn through the windows of the drawing-room and study, and then stood confronting one another.

Mrs. Gifford was a calm, grave woman, and Horace Essenden a wild, excitable being, whose want of self-command she could deplore. She was a woman on guard, and he was more unlike himself than usual.

"What have you to tell me of so great importance that you come here once again like a robber?" she inquired sharply, but dispassionately.

"Like the robber of your peace that I am. Yes, a robber, Laura; that is the right title. I accept it."

"Do not call me Laura again," she said; "it is not fair or right."

"You are Laura to me. You must be in my heart always the woman whom I first loved, who said that she loved me and would wait for me. There, there; I have no right to reproach you," he said, as she shrank away from him with a new look of terror in her face; "it was all a misunderstanding, perhaps, but it ended tragically for both of us."

"And it has ended now for ever. Your word, Mr. Essenden; remember."

"It has ended for ever, granted, Mrs. Gifford; and I am to talk to you no more, look at you no more, save as his wife. Right, quite right," he said, passing his hand over his forehead; "and I was an

accursed knave to remind you of what has been. But you were not happy, and my heart was full of its own agony, and would speak. After all, I have been only truthful, and have wished no one harm. Whatever I may have thought, I have meant no harm to him or you."

"Hush, hush! I know that. You respect me, and I respect myself," she said; "but I am his wife, and it was not fair to think of me at all."

She took no blame unto herself for that, and he might have reminded her then how far her vanity, her curiosity, had led him on to that confession; but he was so far a gentleman as to accept her reproaches, and make no defence against them. He was a poor, weak fellow himself, as vain as the woman before him; a pitiable being, who would not have been dangerous had it not been for the earnestness with which he pursued his passion, and the reality, as it were, of his sufferings. He felt all that he said. The man lived and breathed in an unreal atmosphere for awhile, and believed in himself and his romance; hence an awkward customer for a sentimental woman to encounter. An awkward customer for any woman to encounter, if we may take Augusta Gifford for an example of the rest of the sex; for he was a cool and clever man when he encountered cool and clever women, as though he knew by instinct that his

natural rantism would but lower him in the eyes of sensible folk. Perhaps he had also been anxious to test the extent of his power in the old days, and been piqued a little by the sensible, clever, quiet Augusta Gifford's manner towards him.

"I would have kept my word by you, Mrs. Gifford," he said—and of course he meant what he said at that time; no one could have doubted it, to look into that handsome open face of his—"and have sought to see you no more alone and with my mask off; but circumstances have arisen which compel me to intrude upon you. My brother Paul has returned to Deeneford."

"Your brother!" said Mrs. Gifford; and then she paused for a moment to consider that new position of affairs, and in what way it would affect her. She had known Paul in times past at Wilton; they had been all friends together—playmates together in the far-away times when Mr. Gifford was nothing to them, and troubled not their thoughts, save on Sundays, when he preached too long sermons from his pulpit to them. This Paul Essenden had known of the secret engagement between her and his brother Horace, and been interested in it after his desultory fashion, until he had gone to his aunt's house at Deeneford to live; and he was a wild, thoughtless fellow, who it was not likely could keep

the great secret ; for it had become a great secret since the new romance was born, and Mr. Gifford sat complacently in the dark, thinking how everybody trusted in him.

“ Yes, my brother, who knows all.”

“ Not that—not that you have ever thought of me since my marriage ? ” she said eagerly, and yet hesitatingly.

“ Yes ; for he had heard of my engagement from Mrs. Martin, and hastened to congratulate me, thinking—oh, heaven!—that it was to you I was about to be married. I broke down, Laura—Mrs. Gifford ; I was a child then, and he understood my story.”

“ What is to be done ? ” and Mrs. Gifford looked towards the study window, from which the light still shone. “ I think that I will go to him at once, and tell him all the truth. It will be best and more honest. I have been only a little weak ; and he will think of my youth, my first engagement, and after awhile, not at once, forgive me.”

“ He will never forgive you,” was the fierce answer. “ He is a cold-hearted, unforgiving man, and you would wound his pride too deeply. He would think the very worst of you and me, for it is not in his heart to understand us, or to do us justice.”

“ Oh, what a fool I have been ! ” exclaimed the

young wife, and perhaps one or two of our readers will be of the same opinion as ourselves and Mrs. Gifford. She had played a dangerous game, for the mere excitement of the thing, as many hundreds have done before her; and now the game had become complicated, and the players fearfully interested and confounded. It was pure romance à la Française, and such plants do not grow well on English soil, but put forth ugly shoots, and bloom never.

Mrs. Gifford shuddered; she was inclined to think that Horace Essenden was right enough, and that her stern husband would think the very worst of her.

"Paul is to be trusted," said Horace; "a careless, thoughtless fellow in matters that affect himself, that is all. I would trust him with my life. Why, I trust him with my honour, which is more than life, and he knows it."

Mrs. Gifford did not answer; perhaps Horace Essenden's high sense of honour had not struck her so forcibly before, even though he had spoken of it more than once when Augusta Gifford lay heavy upon his conscience.

"What does he know, Mr. Essenden? You have not been cruel enough to bring my name into question—to boast, perhaps, as you men will boast

at times, that a woman has been weak enough to listen for a moment to you ? ”

“ No, I have simply told him what I could not hide—that I tried to live down the past, and that, failing in the effort, I gave in. What I think of you he knows ; that I proposed to Miss Gifford almost in despair, when I came to Devonshire and found that you were married, he is aware also ; but he believes that you are ignorant of my passion, and that I suffer alone. I wish I did.”

Mrs. Gifford wished so too, for she was embarrassed now. She was afraid of Paul Essenden ; and what might follow his coming in their midst.

“ Pray go away now,” she murmured ; “ leave me to think of this.”

“ I feared that you might be startled by his presence in church to-morrow—if he goes to church—or meet him suddenly, and be alarmed lest he should tell his aunt that you and I would have been man and wife had there been that faith in each other which is lasting and true.”

“ Ah, don’t reproach me ! ” she cried. “ The past is dead between us, and you know that I cannot answer you. I was wrong, but spare me for my husband’s sake.”

“ There, there, I have acted like a wretch again,

—I have no consideration. Forgive me, and I will talk no more of my love for you.”

“You are forgiven. Now go.”

And once more she glanced towards the study window, where the light still streamed into the night, and whence Mr. Gifford’s voice, reciting his sermon as he wrote, might be heard distinctly as they paused, like a tragic chorus to their sentiment. It was a strange position; above there the minister of God speaking of heaven and heaven’s mercy to the sinner repenting at the eleventh hour, and below him these poor earthlings trifling with error, and trying to believe how strong and firm they were, meaning no harm. She had told Horace Essenden to go, but still he lingered. There was a spell upon him, and he could not break away from it. This was for the last time, he believed—as he had believed twenty times before; but he was at her side again, and she knew that he loved her. He believed, too, that she loved him, had always loved him, and there was romance, passion, and poetry in the story which rendered it ever attractive to him. And yet he respected her, and would not have had the world breathe a syllable of scandal against her; in his heart he thought he would have died for her at any moment.

“One instant longer,” he pleaded. “Let me

“speak of Augusta again. I have been thinking so much of her during the last few days. Tell me what to do once more, and I will do it.”

“Be true to her, and forget me.”

“Yes, that’s it!” cried a voice behind them, and then a new figure appeared upon the scene, and stood between this pair of *ci-devant* lovers, confounding and amazing them. Laura Gifford with difficulty suppressed a scream at this sudden apparition before her, and Horace Essenden stepped back into a bed of geraniums, and committed sad havoc on the instant.

“Who are you, woman? What do you want trespassing in this garden?” he asked, in an angry whisper.

“I will tell you, sir, presently,” was the quiet answer of the woman addressed—a tall woman, dressed in a dark merino dress. “Wait for me in the high road, please. I wish to speak to you.”

It was almost a command, and he winced and marvelled at it.

“Go, please,” said Mrs. Gifford, in an agitated voice. “I beg you to wait for this person. Surely you will not refuse me this request?”

“No, I will go. But are you safe?”

“Safer with me than you, sir, I think,” was the quick reply from the new-comer. “I am Miss Hewitt, of the Upland Farm.”

"What can have brought you here?" asked Horace.

"I will tell you presently," said Nella. Then, as he walked moodily away, she turned to Mrs. Gifford quickly—

"Oh, madam, if I could explain to you how sorry I am to see this."

Mrs. Gifford held her ground for awhile. She could not understand why the farmer's niece should watch her thus—why a woman whom she had never seen in her life should thus unceremoniously intrude upon her.

"To see what, Miss Hewitt, if you are Miss Hewitt?" inquired Mrs. Gifford, with a voice that trembled at first, but gained strength as she proceeded. "Is there anything so remarkable in a friend of my husband's stepping over here with the news of his brother's return—is it more surprising than this visit of your own?"

"Pardon me, madam, but I know all."

"All! You know all what?"

"All the story. I suppose it is not fine manners to listen, but I am not a woman of fine manners, and have not been brought up well, take it all together," was the sorrowful answer. "I have been acting upon my own judgment, not having a friend to advise me, and wishing to know the worst and best

of it all—that is, of the story, you understand—before I acted for myself. Hence I listened to-night—I listened last Saturday, when it was supposed that Mr. Essenden was in London.”

“Great heaven! I am in your power, then!” exclaimed Laura passionately; then she put her hands to her temples, and glared at this new spectre which her own indiscretion had conjured up.

“I will do you no harm, madam,” said Nella. “I have felt for you a little,” she added hesitatingly, “for you have liked him, and you were led away to marry the other one. And, Mrs. Gifford, I hope to keep your secret.”

The minister’s wife did not reply; she glanced more than once towards the study window nervously, and then looked down at the grass at her feet, but she did not even thank the woman for her promise.

“For I think,” Nella continued, “that you are only weak, and perhaps don’t quite know your own mind. I judge this, not having much knowledge of the world—that is, of a world like yours—but seeing that you are always in trouble, and always inclined to back away from Mr. Essenden, and to bind him by a promise not to seek you out.”

“What interest have you in me or him, Miss Hewitt?” asked Laura.

“None at all,” was the blunt answer; “but in

the man in his room up-stairs, and in the woman who is engaged to Mr. Essenden, a great deal—a very great deal.”

“I do not understand you.”

“I cannot explain,” said Nella. “Perhaps I like the brother and sister who have called upon my uncle—perhaps it’s a strange fancy of a strange girl: think what you will of my reasons, but give me credit for being terribly in earnest.”

Mrs. Gifford could give her credit for nothing of the kind, but she restrained the wish to tell her so. It was a paltry curiosity that had run her to earth, that would exult in the scandal which it was in her power to promulgate. This was a common specimen of a half-educated country girl, and if it resolved itself into a question of money for her silence, why, the silence must be bought, or she must confess all to her husband. She was doubtful yet which was the better course to adopt, but she was becoming bewildered, and the latter alternative appeared the wiser, until Nella said—

“I will keep your secret, if you will keep your word and not see that man again.”

“Ha! I know now. It is jealousy which has made you play the spy, Miss Hewitt.”

“Jealousy is never merciful,” said Nella, “and if I were in love with Mr. Essenden I should not

spare you—possibly not him. I dare say I should be as revengeful as most women. But Miss Gifford might break her heart about that man if she thought that he was false to her—she loves him more than her own life, I know; and I sometimes think and hope that after all he loves her in his heart, and that this is a silly fancy of a man not particularly strong. Perhaps if I told all to Miss Gifford—not to your husband—it would be better for her; but I don't know. I have tried to think, but the thoughts will not come right, and I am afraid of making her unhappy. So I give him another chance for her sake, although I don't quite see myself," she added, with a thoughtful naïveté, "what there is to like in him much."

Yes, this was a strange woman, thought Mrs. Gifford—one whose reasoning was shallow, and yet unworldly—whose moral reasoning was far from perfect, and who would keep the secret of this dangerous flirtation for the sake of the woman who should have known it first, and who was to remain still deceived, according to Nella Carr's idea of what was best for her happiness. She would give him one chance, Nella said, as though she was the arbiter of Horace Essenden's fate: and at that time, perhaps, she was.

"I must trust you," murmured Mrs. Gifford; "I

—I can explain my motives for all this, but you would not care to hear them.”

“No, I shouldn’t,” said Nella; “I am pressed for time. I have stolen from the house to watch you, feeling sure that he would come, although he promised not. If he had not come you might have never seen me, madam, for at least I should not have intruded here, and you were not likely to have visited my uncle’s house. There, I hope I have been kind. I think I make you out pretty well, and if you really love him still I pity you with all my heart—almost as much as I pity that poor, mistaken gentleman who deserved a better wife.”

“Hush, please,” exclaimed Laura, recoiling at this; “you do not know the truth, only part of it, and I have been only led to pity Mr. Essenden a little. I love my husband; I would not wrong him by a word or thought.”

“I hope not,” said Nella gravely. “I am trying very hard to think the best of you. When I think the worst—when I find that that girl so much above all of you, all of the world I know—is still deceived, I spare neither man nor woman to set her right. Remember this.”

She passed swiftly round the house in search of Mr. Essenden, and at the same moment the study

light was extinguished, and fresh darkness seemed to have stolen to the place to submerge these three mistaken ones.

For Horace Essenden had watched the interview from the distance, being fearful of what might be its termination, doubtful as to how Laura Gifford's strength would hold out against the reproaches which might be hurled at her.

But it had been a quiet interview, and he was somewhat puzzled at it.

"Now it's my turn," he said, biting his lip; "it's an awkward affair, but I must take all the blame, and shield poor Laura from harm in every way that I can."

"I am ready, Mr. Essenden," said Nella, coming up with him; and he looked askance at her, not liking the tone of voice in which she had addressed him. He bowed his head gravely to her, however, and then they went slowly and cautiously away from the house, and through the open gate into the high road.

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH.

HORACE ESSENDEN IS WARNED.

NELLA CARR and Horace Essenden went together along the high road towards Deeneford Hall. Both were silent for awhile, each revolving the best method of attack and defence, now that there was no escaping the *dénouement*.

Nella was the first to speak; the strange and unlooked-for vindicator of Augusta Gifford's rights began at last, with a suddenness and a sharpness that grated on the fine ears of the gentleman.

"You are engaged to marry Miss Gifford, sir—still engaged to marry her?"

"It is no secret in Deeneford, I believe," was the slow answer.

Horace Essenden was very much on his guard; his was a dangerous part to play, and he knew nothing of the character of the woman who addressed him. She was abrupt in her questions, and there was a want of refinement about her altogether which displeased him. Had he encountered

a lady, a friend of Augusta or of Mrs. Gifford's, he could have more easily explained, he thought; but there was something bitterly humiliating in having to confess his weaknesses to one so infinitely below him in the social scale. Had he been found out by Mr. Gifford's cook or butler it would have been almost as ignominious, and it would have been far easier to purchase silence. But a farmer's daughter was difficult to comprehend; she might be a lady or she might not, according to the father's ideas on education, and hence it was difficult to see his way.

"Engaged to marry Miss Gifford, and yet to run after one so immeasurably her inferior. What a strange man you must be."

"You know Miss Gifford?"

"Know her!" exclaimed Nella; "she is the best friend that I have ever had."

"How long have you known her, then?"

"I am not here to answer your questions," said Nella, with a want of ceremony that would have done honour to her uncle's style of discourse at times; "I am here to make you out, if I can. I have been trying, but you puzzle me. I have been watching you for weeks—in those weeks when it was supposed you were in London, and instead of which you were hovering about this place, crossing

our fields after dark on Saturday nights to speak to Mrs. Gifford—to tempt that poor, childish woman to think less of her husband and more of you.”

“I have been watched, then. What possible good can accrue to you, Miss Hewitt, for playing thus the spy on me?”

“No good—harm, perhaps, for I make enemies. But good may follow to her whom I serve, and in whose interests I am acting.”

“Has she commissioned you to——”

“Oh, she knows nothing of this,” interrupted Nella. “I do not want to break her heart, if I can help it.”

“Tell me what you want me to do or say, please,” said Horace, giving up the enigma. “I am to a certain extent in your power, Miss Hewitt; am I to look for generosity or enmity towards me?”

“I will tell you at once,” said Nelly; “begging you always to understand that I am thinking of Miss Gifford a great deal, and of her brother, the clergyman, a little. Probably it would be the best thing for them to be rid of you both, but they would not think so; and they are proud and honest people, who would feel the disgrace and sink under it. And if I can save all four—why, that’s something.”

Mr. Horace Essenden glanced askance at the

speaker. Yes, an odd woman, he thought—about the very last person in the world with whom he would have cared to share his secret. A wild, enthusiastic woman, with strange notions of right and wrong, of bringing round the first and correcting the last—altogether dangerous unless her sympathy with those she loved would keep her silent from that night.

“I thought, Mr. Essenden, that you were a villain, until I listened to all that you said this day week—to all your promises. I thought that you were very weak when you flung yourself face-foremost on the grass after she had gone, and cried there like a baby. But I felt that you would come back to-night with an excuse to see that poor woman again.”

“I should have kept my word, had it not been for my brother’s return.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Nella.

“As you please,” replied Horace loftily; then he dropped his haughty manner on the instant, and said, “I cannot suppose that you would place much confidence in my word, knowing too well that I have behaved in a manner of which I am ashamed. You know what I am—you have no reason to be merciful towards me—I am wholly to blame.”

“Yes, I know what you are; I have not listened

for nothing," said Nella ; "and I dare say you don't think a great deal of me for playing the eavesdropper so persistently. Persons of a high degree of excellence, of a superior moral training, would have spurned the means which I have used even to have obtained possession of the facts. But my moral training has been defective, and I could not see any other way to save Miss Gifford, if it were necessary. And saved she must be from you, or for you, according to your own sense of honour—if there is any honour left in you, that is, for all this talk about it."

"I hope there is," said Essenden. "I have intended no harm. I swear to you, Miss Hewitt, that I have been weak and foolish in thinking too much of her whom I should have married, and that that is the whole of my offence."

"Well, she is married, and another woman is in love with you," said Nella. "Ay, and so truly in love, that I believe her disappointment would shadow her whole life. She deserves to be happy, and if this is only a folly, a something which cannot be explained, but can easily be forgotten, why, it might be as well to let her live on believing in you, rather than to crush her down with the whole truth."

"You wish me to own that this is a passing folly?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can't," Horace Essenden said boldly. "I will keep my word, and meet Mrs. Gifford only as a common-place acquaintance ; but I have loved her, and it is not easy to forget her."

"You will not meet her again—like this?"

"No."

"You will see more of Miss Gifford than of her?"

"Yes."

"When is it proposed by the family that you two should marry?"

"In the spring."

"That is in eight or nine months' time," said Nella reflectively. "Why, that is a long time for a man to find out what a scamp he has been, and be sorry, and the better for the knowledge. You must have thought at one time, I suppose, that Augusta Gifford would make you a good wife?"

"Yes, I have been sure of that."

"And you must have loved her then, or you would have never asked her to have you," said Nella, who knew nothing of Mr. Gifford's manœuvres. "And it is this which makes me hope that all will come round in good time. For, sir," she added enthusiastically to the still bewildered Horace, "she is above the rest of us, and neither she nor her brother would make allowance for the weak, sinful creatures that we are. They are too good, and

would be too exacting—and oh, the misery to all that a hasty confession, such as mine, would bring about.”

“Yes, yes—that’s true,” said Horace eagerly. Miss Hewitt’s reasoning was singular, and not quite comprehensible in all its details, but there was a glimmering of hope now that all would subside, and leave peace with him on his path ahead. Not happiness, never happiness, he thought gloomily, but peace of mind to all whose confidence he had abused.

“There is time for reparation,” said Nella; “in eight months’ time what a difference there may be in all our thoughts, and how possible to smile at all the follies which our vanity has made for us. Well, Mr. Essenden,” pausing at the road which diverged towards her uncle’s farm, “I don’t know that I need say any more concerning this; I have done my duty to a friend, and I have not been unmerciful to you. In eight months you can love Augusta Gifford as she deserves to be loved, and forget Mr. Gifford’s wife as she has a right to be forgotten, if you like. I believe that, by the help of prayer and our own strong heart, it is possible to become anything we choose,” she cried, “and there is no difficulty—rather an easy task—in what your duty teaches you. You have not tried yet, but now you will know yourself, and become more honest in your dealings with us women?”

"I will do my best," said Horace, warmly, "I will succeed or give her up." Miss Hewitt's enthusiasm had touched him, and though she was still a mystery to him, and would ever remain so, he was grateful for the unworldly manner in which she had regarded his dilemma. It was possible to amend, to love Augusta and forget his first love with time before him, and with the sense of his injustice very acute and self-tormenting until the reparation was made, and he—as his companion had phrased it—was more honest. He was grateful for her silence, for her wish to sink the by-gones, for her good opinion of him still, despite that weakness which had led him on to much that was wrong; and he drew a deep breath of relief as he pictured what might have been the result had Mr. Gifford or his aunt been the spy.

"If you fail," continued Nella, "tell me fairly in six months' time that it is beyond your power—tell her so, and let her get rid of you quietly and at once. For you shall not marry her without love, I swear!" she cried passionately. "I watch over her whilst I can, whilst I have life. And to attempt the old folly—remember this, please—is simply to disgrace yourself and that woman, who is weaker perhaps than you are. Renew that, and within twenty-four hours of my knowledge of it, I, believing

you both devoid of principle, will denounce you both to the man you both deceive."

She went away towards the farm after this last warning, and Horace did not feel quite so comfortable as he had done, although he made up his mind to amend his ways from that night. He had promised Mrs. Gifford that, and though he had intended to keep his word, the peril by which he was environed now seemed to bind him to it. He was not a brave man, and he could not regard the ruin of his name, the ruin of his prospects, with composure. And besides, he was not a bad man; he wished well to everybody, and, despite his impulsiveness, which led him the wrong road, he certainly prided himself upon his sense of honour still. Horace Essenden had the idea that he was more the victim of circumstances, than the villain and schemer who would do harm to his kind; let him honestly repent of his follies, and he would be very near perfection, he thought. So thought his brother Paul—Paul, who was lying in bed thinking of him, congratulating himself that the student and the poet had not heard him climb up the lattice and steal into the house again, like a disreputable fellow who loved the night, and could not rest peaceably anywhere.

CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH.

MR. GEORGE HEWITT IN A NEW LIGHT.

NELLA CARR, as we have a right to call her when no listeners are near, went slowly and thoughtfully towards her own home, thinking of the good that she had effected, and the better days for all she loved that would begin from that night. She had done her duty ; her watching had been a success, and all was as it should be.

She opened the door by means of the big key which admitted her into the house, and went softly along the stone passage, for fear of awakening her uncle or the maid-servants. She paused at the foot of the stairs, as if reflecting whether there were any necessity to look in the farmhouse parlour or not before ascending to her room, and then, deciding in the negative, she made two or three steps upwards, when a deep, hoarse voice, that she scarcely recognised, said, " Nella," from below her.

She paused again in the darkness that reigned

throughout the house, and again the hoarse voice welled from the distance—

“Nella.”

“Is it you, uncle?” she asked in a low voice.

“Yes, it is I—I wish to speak to you.”

She went down-stairs, pushed open the door, and entered the parlour, where a light was burning, and where sat her uncle at the table, with a strange, dark face, at which she had never gazed yet. She saw at once that her secret had been discovered—at least, that part of the secret which related to her leaving the house by stealth, and without his knowledge.

“Nella,” he said slowly, as though he found a difficulty in finding words for his question, “where have you been to-night?”

She took off her bonnet and cloak before she replied to him, doubtful what to say, or whether she had a right to trust him with a secret that was not her own.

“Well,” he said, “well, say something.”

“I will ask you, uncle, not to question me until I have had time to think—to trust in me implicitly, despite the mystery of my present actions.”

“I can believe in nothing that is hidden—in no one who has not faith in me.”

“This is not my secret, or I would tell you willingly.”

"Girl, you lie!" he shouted forth, and the clenched hand came down upon the table with a noise that shook the house. "Have I lived so long, and known so much of deceit in my miserable life, as to be hoodwinked by a child like you? The truth, whatever it is, Nella."

His voice softened somewhat for an instant at this last appeal, and she said—

"Patience; give me time."

"Not to frame your excuses; that will not do," he said hastily. "Give me trust for trust, and let me share your sorrows, if you have any. Conceal from me what I have a right to know, interpose between me and you a cloud of doubt which must harden like a wall, and I will have none of you. I will go away—I will be heard of no more."

"You are angry, uncle, you are unnaturally excited. I must think whether I have a right to divulge a secret which is not mine—which I swear to you is not mine."

"Why start from the house like this to meet Mr. Horace Essenden?"

"Ah, you have watched me?"

"I saw you two together at the end of this lane. I have been watching for you under the porch. Is it possible that after all my teaching, all my hopes,



you turn from me at the first compliment of a brainless idiot like him? Is it possible," he cried, starting to his feet and beginning to pace up and down the room, "that he dares to make an assignation with you, and that you are shameless enough to keep it as though you were the lowest farm-wench in my employ? Does he know that his life is in danger from to-night? Does he know me? Does he think that I would hesitate for an instant to shoot him like a dog if he meant harm to you?"

"You need not be afraid of my being in love with Mr. Essenden," said Nella proudly, "or that I would seek to meet him without a motive worthy of the new life where you have placed me—worthy of your own high principles."

"They are low ones—they are regulated by no laws," he cried hastily. "You cannot talk me over with these sentimental protests. You must explain why you met that man, not ask me to give you credit for the upright intentions which led you to the act."

"Ah, then," sighed Nella, "after four years you do not believe in me; you look back to the ill-trained girl whom you rescued from infamy, and put no faith in your own teaching."

"There is too much mystery about me—too much uncertainty everywhere—not to feel that with your

standing apart in thought from me there must come a bitterness of spirit which would render life not worth the having. Nella," he said, pausing to confront her again, with that wild yet earnest expression on his face which she could scarcely understand, "my life has been a desolate one for many years, but I return to it in preference to being deceived by her for whom alone I care to live. If it is easier to part with me than to trust in me, say so, and—there, there, there, I'll leave you to yourself."

He moved towards the door, as though to snatch his hat from the peg, and go away at once; and the fierce determination in his face implied the power to end all happiness and to turn his back upon it for ever.

"Why, why will you not trust me?" pleaded Nella, wringing her hands, "or give me till to-morrow to think of this? You would not leave me utterly alone?"

"Ay, but I would," answered he, "for I have been living for you, not for myself, and the gold that I have earned I would fling into the next ditch but for you."

"And yet, have you trusted wholly in me? Have you told me all?"

He stopped, and pressed his two hands to his temples, and glared at her.

"What—what have I kept from you?"

"Heaven knows," she answered; "but there is a secret, and I have not tried to pierce it, trusting to your belief that it was right I should not know it. I have been content to love you, and let the mystery keep its place behind us—thinking sometimes that you would be happier with me for confidante, than brooding on sorrows or wrongs which belong to a past I do not share with you; and then thinking again that if it were a secret that was another's, like my own, and might bring about another's ruin by a careless word let drop, a meaning look cast right or left, how much better it was to sit in the dark without it."

"I hide my secret—for I have one, yes—solely for your sake," he groaned forth. "You do not think of me. It is not want of faith or doubt of your discretion that has kept me tongue-tied—rather to save you from a humiliation, and to hold your thoughts pure towards the wretch before you."

"Uncle!" she gasped forth.

"Well," he said, taking a long breath, "you have not loved me well enough to trust in me, and the extent of your common gratitude thrusts me at arms' length, and turns to a man you have not known two months. You cannot love me less than you do, and so I will tell you what my secret is, and then step

away to a life that no one guesses but myself, or to the first easy death that comes across my mind."

"No, no, don't tell me," cried Nella.

"You will hate me, but I shan't care for that," he said, with increasing sternness. "I have deserved the hate all along, and have smuggled from you that poor respect which I took for affection, and which I do not care to have. At all events, there shall not be one excuse for keeping back your confidence from me."

"Don't tell me," urged Nella again. "I can't hate you; whatever it is, I will love and pity you; but for your own sake—your own self-respect, be silent."

"It is too late."

Nella stood by the table in the same position that she had assumed upon entering the room, but with a face more full of terror and surprise. A secret consciousness of what was coming kept her spell-bound, suspended her breath, stopped those rapid heart-beats which had seemed choking her a moment since.

"On your left arm, Nella, is the mark of the devil's school—the brand which, half in sport, half in defiance of prudence, they set there, linking you to crime, and registering you as one of that awful gang from which you have escaped. A fool's trick

—bad as a matter of policy—but common to the class from which you have been saved. Is that the mark ? ”

He suddenly bared his own arm to the elbow, and on the powerful limb, faintly traced there in lines which time had rendered grey, was the same accursed brand.

“ Oh, uncle, uncle, is it so ? ” she cried, bursting into tears. “ Have you too been tempted—gone wrong like me, and been rescued by a miracle ? I am so sorry—so very, very sorry, and yet, oh ! so glad that I understand you, and draw nearer to you by that sympathy of suffering which makes us one ! ”

“ By that link of our past crime which keeps us in the dust for ever—which places me beside you, the thief and convict that I have been,” he answered, “ is yours so great a secret as that ? ”

“ No.”

“ Then tell it me.”

“ But it affects the characters, perhaps the lives, of others.”

“ So does mine, for I have forfeited all self-respect in telling you, and I steal away into the darkness to which I naturally belong. The uncle whom you have known melts away, a waxen figure in the sun, a thing that never had existence, and that only

mocked you with the lie it was, and the *father*, the guilty father of whom your mother warned you, and taught you to hate, is left to shudder at !”

“ My father—you, you, my father ?” gasped forth Nella. “ Oh, it can’t be !”

“ Yes, I am George Carr, a great villain in his day ; a man who was transported, served his time out, and came back here on a fool’s errand, at which a child might laugh,” he answered bitterly. “ Don’t come near him, lest he be the villain still for whose first crime your mother suffered, confessing to a false accusation for his sake, and for the sake of his position in a merchant’s counting-house. The villain who let her suffer, and then was swept off himself into the sea of crime surging in our streets. The villain who step by step went downwards, dragged her downwards, and taught her to hate his name for all his selfishness, and for the very devil that was in him, until, in her despair and bitter penitence, she stole away from him, as he now steals away from you.”

“ No, no, let me——”

“ Keep back, Nella. Here your sphere with your lover till he casts you off ; beyond here mine, that’s all. We are not fated to keep honest long, we Carrs—the black blood runs in us too thickly.”

“ Great Heaven, how soon he doubts me !” cried

Nella ; "this man who owns himself my father, and has sacrificed so much for me !"

"Who has lived a life of doubts, and must doubt her who hides her heart away from him. Well," he said mockingly, "you have had a fair reason not to confide in me too much—your instincts are right—and if yours is an honest secret, why, so much the better that I should not know it."

"You cannot go away like this, father."

"Ay, but I can. It is perfectly easy. If I had not made up my mind to go, I should not have told you who I was."

He took down his hat at last, pulled it firmly on his head, and looked towards her half sadly and half sternly. She was at his side the instant afterwards, her hands linked upon his arm, although he tried to shake them from it.

"Then I will go with you," she said, "for you and I are together whilst we live. We are too closely allied to stand asunder any more ; we have both sinned and repented, and we need each other's help to keep us strong. Anywhere in the world with you, oh, my poor father !—loving you, not fearing you, for all that makes the past less dark between us, and keeps us trustful in each other."

"Trustful, Nella ?" he murmured reproachfully.

"Yes, for from my father I can have no secrets,

not even those secrets which affect the happiness of others, but which he is sure to keep, knowing whose happiness it is. Oh, sir, I have nothing to conceal now, if you will forgive my stubbornness !”

“Don’t kneel, for mercy’s sake, don’t kneel to me,” he implored, as he caught her to his breast ; “you know what I have been.”

“And what you are—patient, long-suffering, generous, and penitent.”

“There is no atonement for the past—there is not time. I knew that there would never be time for me when I came back to find your mother, and only saw her coffin let down in the grave.”

“With the future before us, with you and I together, and what may not be in store, with God’s help ?”

“And you—you don’t hate me ? I don’t feel you shrink away from me,” he said, as his arms tightened round her.

“No, why should I ?”

“I—I don’t think I care about this secret of yours now,” said this inconsistent being, as he flung his hat into a corner of the room ; “you have mine instead, and there’s an end of it.”

“And you the happier for it ?”

“Presently, perhaps ; but I shall be more watchful for any sign that tells me you are tired of

me,—that you regard me as the author of your misery.”

“And you will fret about my secret in your heart, and grieve because the daughter had not faith enough to tell it you. You will see in every action of my own the shadow of that past, dimming everything that should be bright—why, that must be bright now! You are right, I can have no secrets from you.”

“Well, well, it’s right, I think. I am glad you have the courage to tell me, for you confide in me, and that is what I want. Only be true to me, Nella, and you shall have no greater slave.”

Then father and daughter sat down, and Nella Carr told him the secret of Horace Essenden’s engagement, and of his past love for the pretty woman who was now Mr. Gifford’s wife; and thus three persons in one day knew all the truth concerning it.

“It was no business of ours, Nella dear,” he said thoughtfully, “and we had better have left these silly people to act out their own romance.”

“Oh, no; you must not say that.”

“They were good to you in their way, and the woman who is deceived was very kind to the mother and to you. Why not open her eyes to the truth?”

“It would kill her, perhaps; you don’t know how she loves him, but I do. He will repent, like our-

selves ; and we must not cut down every chance of comfort for them all, but watch and let them have fair play."

"She is too good for him."

"I know it, but she does not."

"And the other one is too bad for the minister."

"Too weak and foolish only. She will grow out of that, and he is very happy now, almost as happy as so good a man deserves to be."

"You did not care for him a great deal once."

"In my riper knowledge I see his worth," was Nella's answer.

"Yes; you think of him more than me," he murmured half-reproachfully again, until Nella spoke once more of their lives together till the end, and then the tears stole into his eyes, and quenched the jealous fire that flickered there.

CHAPTER THE FIFTEENTH.

PAUL DOES NOT IMPROVE.

GEORGE HEWITT, as we shall continue to call him for awhile, began wheat-cutting on the Monday, as though no thought of giving up farming and leaving England had ever crossed his mind. The storm was over, and the atmosphere was clearer in consequence ; father and daughter understood each other, and had no secrets in the background. He was possibly a happier man at heart for the revelation. He breathed freer now that the worst was known, and his daughter did not despise him as he had feared she would. He was not the good man that his daughter Nella had fancied—the one good man of the family, and who, for the family's sake, had rescued her from the clutches of the thieves—but the man who, in his earlier days, had dragged them all down to his level.

A strange man had he been ; there was nothing stranger than his penitence, born of his solitary life

in Australia, where he had had time to reflect upon the past, and to mourn over it; where he had suffered a long sickness, with a good man to nurse him through it back to life, and to teach him for the first time what life's duties were. As he had become rich, when his time was out, and the world lay before him, so he had thought of those whom he had brought to ruin, and yearned to make peace with his wife, whose last words had been a curse upon him for all the evil of which he had been the cause. Not a religious man in the ordinary acceptation of the word, shunning preachers, and believing too much in himself and in his own ideas of what was just and right; grateful for his new life, and his good fortune which had placed some one at his side to love him and to be loved; fierce and passionate still, but checking his natural impetuosity with a strength of will that was remarkable. Such was this man in his latter days. Far from a perfect man, but repentant for all his miserable past, and anxious, by a better and more honest life, to make amends for all his past misdeeds. He was one of the few who turn back at the eleventh hour; and had he been more religious, a less suspicious and firm man, one could have rejoiced more completely over the regeneration of so dark a character.

There was more affection, more of the father, in

his manner towards Nella after that stormy night in the farm parlour, where each had had a secret to divulge. He was more gentle and less brusque; to her even strangely deferential at times, as though he was the friend upon sufferance, a some one whom she might dislike at any moment, and thus send him adrift upon the world again.

"When I feel you love me less in any way, why, I will go," he said, with that new strange humility which only Nella's efforts could subdue. "Find the courage to avow that truth, Nella, and never let me rest a burden on your thoughts."

"Why should I love you less?"

"You know all."

"All that you have saved me from."

"But to which I first reduced you," was the quick answer, "from which you would have escaped with your mother long ago, had I not brought her to ruin—kept ever before her the awful moral that I was."

Nella reasoned with him as she had done on that night when he had first confessed to her, and presently he seemed assured, and came round by degrees to his usual self.

The first day or two after harvesting had begun, he was somewhat unsettled in mind; but it was a busy season, and the out-door occupation helped to

distract his thoughts from all that had occurred to place him and Nella in their new positions ; and after that he and Nella settled down, and were kinder and more gentle to each other, drawn closer by the new link that bound their hearts together. Both unfortunate, who knew much of the outer world beyond the fence with which respectable society hems itself in ; who had both turned away from the darkness, and now, supported by each other's love, were toiling slowly upwards.

One man only from the new world in which they moved, and yet which they scarcely acknowledged to be theirs, came amongst them unsolicited, and would not be driven away by any want of welcome. He was a man cool and persistent in his attempts to seek their friendship, and he would not accept a rebuff or attempt to understand it.

George Hewitt had been nervous of this new-found friend. After he had told all to his daughter, it had seemed still more imperative that he should not see him frequently ; but the compact had been entered into, and Paul Essenden did not understand a man like Hewitt changing his mind. He knew, too, that the farmer would be glad to see him presently ; for he understood Hewitt, he thought, and he set down to the farmer's natural modesty that which was really, in the first in-

stance, a strong disinclination to continue his acquaintance.

Only in the first instance, be it here remarked; for Paul's persistency, his natural good qualities, his frankness, his disregard for appearances, allied to the natural liking that Hewitt had always had for him, soon rendered the man who had never done much good in the world a welcome guest at the Upland Farm. He reversed positions to a certain extent, and gained thereby his advantage; he was always pleading want of friends, want of sympathy with him in the "set" amongst which he took his stand, and he confessed truly enough that he was only at home with the Hewitts. His aunt, who had had a hope that he had sobered down to all the respectabilities, found that for polite society he cared no more than he had ever done. He walked out of the house invariably when company was expected, especially the company of the Giffords, that he adroitly dodged, much to his aunt's vexation; and it was even doubtful whether he would make his appearance at the dinner-hour when Mrs. Martin and her favourite Horace dined alone together. His old irregular habits were subdued a little, that was all; and though he drank no longer to excess, "that odious short pipe," as his aunt termed it, was never out of his mouth.

Mrs. Martin was glad that her nephew was back in Deeneford, for she was a warm-hearted woman, and took pride in the amendment, such as it was, of one of whom everybody had prophesied ill. She was a sanguine woman, who believed that in the society of herself and his brother, Paul would rapidly improve; she was a witness to many good qualities in him which only required proper training, she thought, to expand to virtues, and she attempted twice a quiet lecturing, a little good advice, to which Paul listened gravely, although she found, despite all her efforts, that there was no catching Paul a third time.

"I know what is good and right, as well as any man, Horace," he said one day, three or four weeks after his reappearance, "therefore I don't want the poor old soul to waste her breath in feeble moralisings. Leave me to myself, and I am always at my best."

"But aunt wishes to see more of you, and that is a good sign how rapidly you are reinstating yourself in her good graces."

"I am glad to know that," said Paul thoughtfully.

"And if she could only see you of a more settled disposition, more of a home-bird, Paul, I believe that she would find a corner in her will for you yet."

"And you would not complain?"

"No; I don't want all my aunt's money, and whether I get it or not——"

"Hold hard, please," cried Paul; "nobody said you did, but don't make any promises in the fulness of your heart. That's about the best trait in your character, Horace; you're not a greedy fellow, but if aunt Martin wishes you to have all her worldly goods, I am not likely to interfere, having a trifle of the family spirit, and rather more than a fair share of the family independence."

"Mrs. Martin particularly wishes you to dine here this evening, Paul," said Horace, after a moment's hesitation.

"Indeed—why?"

"Mr. Gifford has expressed an opinion that it is a little odd you are never in the house when he calls, and Augusta is not able to understand it, unless it is your insuperable objection to meet your future sister."

"Oh, I shall see them in time," said Paul carelessly; "I'm not going to run away yet awhile. I have no objection to Miss Gifford, but I don't care a great deal," he added, with a shiver, "about facing the clergyman."

"Your absence is marked, Paul."

"For the reason that you have been talking about me," he answered, "as if there was nothing better

to discuss on the cards than Paul Essenden. Tell them all I mean no offence," he added ; " tell them anything you like—say I'm very busy, or very ill, or that the heat of a room always knocks me over. By Jove, I wish I had been born a gipsy sometimes !"

" Now, Paul," laying his hands on his brother's shoulders, and looking him full in the face, " I am going to ask the favour, the great favour, of your dining with us all this evening. Come."

" That is to say, you are going to ask me to break my word with an old friend."

" You have accepted another invitation, then ?"

" Yes, from the Hewitts."

" The Hewitts ? How fond you are of those people," said Horace, petulantly, as he let his hands drop to his side ; " you were there yesterday."

" How do you know that ?"

" I asked you when you came back last night."

" So you did ; I had forgotten all about that. But to-night is a kind of fête at the farm, and I have promised to assist. It's a regular harvest-home, a new idea of Hewitt's to have more fun and less drink. I'm afraid it will disappoint a great many."

" I have heard something of it ; indeed, it is Augusta's idea rather than Mr. Hewitt's."

“Yes, she told Eleanor; and Eleanor, who swears by Miss Gifford, persuaded her uncle, and so the idea took root. There will be dancing; some fellow is going to tell them a story of Australian life, and set them laughing if he can; and we shall have some singing, plenty of good honest English fun, and we’re going to try if a few of the best of the men—our men in particular—can be persuaded to walk home straight for the first time in their virtuous lives on harvest feast night. My own opinion is, Horace, that it will be a failure; the bucolic mind looks forward too ardently to steeping itself in beer after the wheat has been gathered into the garner.”

“We all think of strolling over, even aunt Martin, after dinner. Surely that will be time enough for you, Paul?”

“Oh, you are all coming, are you?” said Paul ruefully.

“Yes, it is an annual custom in this parish.”

“Gifford is not going to mess about with any of his prayers, is he? for it won’t do, ’pon my word, it won’t do, at such a time.”

“I have not asked Mr. Gifford’s intentions, but it is not likely, I should think. So I’ll tell aunt that you’ll dine with us.”

“No, don’t do that, for I’m going over there

early—at once, in fact—to lend a hand in putting the large barn to rights; and, to let you into the secret, I'm the fellow that is to pitch them the story."

"Is not all this a little 'infra dig.'?"

"Not for me. I want to make these people jolly. Hewitt's a heavy decker, and is glad enough to constitute me master of the ceremonies. He don't understand life quite so well as I do."

"How do you like his niece?" said Horace quietly.

"Who, Eleanor—Miss Hewitt, that is? Why, very much indeed."

"I thought so," answered Horace; "I thought that there must be a reason for all these freaks of yours. But surely, Paul, you are not looking out for a wife in that quarter—you will not wholly disgrace us?"

"Disgrace—oh, no. Keep your fears down, Horace, my boy. Miss Hewitt is quite safe, and Paul Essenden is not a lady's man."

"A woman soon spreads her snares when her heart is set on a conquest," he said.

"Yes, you ought to know that," said Paul, with a dryness that brought the colour to his brother's cheeks, "for you are a lady's man, and goodness knows how many snares and nets you have floun-

dered into, in your day. You'll give us a look up in the evening, then?"

"Yes."

"Don't bring your gentility over the way too soon, or we shall be sitting with our thumbs in our mouths," was Paul's last advice as he pocketed his hands and walked out of the house.

CHAPTER THE SIXTEENTH.

THE HARVEST FEAST.

FARMER HEWITT's harvest feast was a great success, thanks to the efforts of him to whom had been entrusted the general management. The harvesters had been doubtful of the result; they did not want daring innovations and new-fangled notions before and after harvest supper; they had always drunk deeply harvest night, and had been wheeled home in barrows, tumbled into barns, and even, on fine summer nights, left on their backs in the straw-yard. It was not in the memory of even old Grey—whom Paul Essenden had clapped on the back coming home to Deeneford—for a harvester to return sober from the feast; it would not have been a feast to the agricultural mind without illimitable drink, winding up with total unconsciousness. Then it was a feast worth treasuring in the memory till harvest-home came round again. The Deeneford aborigines knew how to drink too; they stood their

ground well, and lightened considerably the barrels of strong ale before they succumbed to the enemy; and the Irish reapers were almost as good as they were, only they grew more quarrelsome, talked politics, and were anxious to fight out their little differences, before the last cup was dropped from the nerveless hand.

Once a man had died of drink in Mr. Fordyce's time, and taught no moral to his fellow-men; and it was Miss Gifford who, having learned this, and knowing how famed Deeneford was for deep drinking, had first set the ball rolling in a new direction, and interested Nella in her scheming for a general amendment. Mr. Hewitt had been won over to give his consent, although somewhat unwillingly. He had seen difficulties in the way, and was anxious to let matters proceed in their old fashion. Why disturb everybody and render everybody uncomfortable? Let the men do as they liked, he had said at first, and not look upon him afterwards as a marplot to all enjoyment. It was enjoyment to get drunk for a labouring man—Hewitt knew that—to sit with tobacco and beer before him, to be always calling for tobacco and beer at some one else's expense, till the pipe dropped from the mouth and was shivered to fragments at his feet, till the hand had not strength to grope for the beer-jug or the gin-bottle, and the

eyes shut as upon a dream of bliss which only the morning could mar.

But this particular feast was to change all this, if possible. In no way to check the liquids which were at command, and over which no one was to hold jurisdiction—to let the men drink as deeply as they liked still—but to distract them from incessant drinking by a few rational amusements, and to fill the great barn with their wives and children, in lieu of keeping as many of them at home as possible, after Mr. Fordyce's plan.

There was dancing in the barn too, and in a second barn beyond the first one, and quite a fancy show of paper lanterns in a variety of colours swaying from the oaken rafters. There had been even a magic lantern for the children—only for the children, it was given out, for fear of wounding the feelings of the adults; but it was found that the reapers left their tables with the rest, and laughed as loudly as the little ones at all the funny slides, and at the funnier remarks of him who worked behind the screen. Then, after that, more dancing—genuine country dancing, and none of your fashionable intricacies; and what with looking for partners, giving their wives a turn, and even their biggest girls, there was really no time to get comfortably intoxicated. Not but what a few succeeded in the effort, by declining to dance on any

pretence whatever, and never allowing their beer-mugs to stand empty—for Mr. Hewitt had not worked a miracle, and only saved from stupefaction the majority. The good old-fashioned reaper, blind to all distractions from his cups, deaf to all whispered remonstrances from his better half, whom he tried to floor at last for interrupting him, was not going to be “done” by his employer, to be swindled out of his drink by insidious means, and to find himself beastly sober the next day. He had come for drink, and he went in for drink ; and as he clung to his table till he slipped under it, and was only quarrelsome in a corner with those as irrational as himself, no great harm was done ; and presently there he was in the stack-yard with his face turned upwards to the moonbeams, a man who had reached the summum bonum of his felicity. But the harvest feast, taken altogether, was a great success, we repeat, and Hewitt and his daughter awarded all the praise to Paul Essenden, who had been master of the ceremonies, teller of anecdotes in general, worker of magic lantern, and everything by turns, till one marvelled at his ubiquity and his unflagging zeal.

“I wonder what we should have done without you, Mr. Essenden,” said Nella, when it was evident that every one was enjoying himself to the utmost.

"Mr. Essenden," he repeated, in well-feigned astonishment; "I thought that you had promised to call me Paul."

"Oh, I never promised that," said Nella, astonished in her turn, and looking a bright and beautiful woman in the midst of her blushes, and with that sadness of expression natural to her face banished in the excitement of the hour.

"I think you did," was Paul Essenden's cool reply. "Did I not tell you that I hated to be called Mr. anything, and that I objected to people putting a handle to my name?"

"I remember your telling uncle something of the kind."

"Yes, but I looked at you," he replied, "and after that you promised something or other—I thought that it was to drop Mr. Essenden. Not that it matters, perhaps."

"I would prefer the Mr. Essenden," said Nella thoughtfully.

"Why?"

"It is less familiar," replied Nella.

"Your uncle calls me Paul."

"He is an old friend."

"So will you be in time. Why, I feel like an old friend already—for I'm at home here. Here I am only at home after all," he added; "and though

that's no reason why you should address me by my Christian name, still it might be as well to encourage a fellow in a few of his ideas."

Nella laughed, but shook her head still, and he went away at that moment to arrange the couples for another dance and to call Mr. Hewitt to order, who was putting them all in the wrong places. Hewitt was more himself that night than he had ever been in Deeneford—more like the George Carr of the Australian days whom Paul had known and we have not. He had shaken off the weight of that past which gave a heavy look to his face, and that uncertainty as to the future which steeped it in grave thought, and he was the genial, warm-hearted master at whom the rustics marvelled greatly. He had his rough jests amongst them, showed that he understood them, and knew what pleased them, and he passed from one group to another, sharing his good fellowship with all, and leaving no one jealous.

"This is as it should be, George," Paul Essenden said to him.

"Ay, for one night perhaps, though I may grow used to my position in time, with you to help me."

"Oh, I'm no longer a nuisance, then?"

"Did you ever think you were?"

"No, but you did," replied Paul, "and I knew

what was best for you, and stuck to the ship, for hanged if I could understand what you had to be thoughtful or nervous about."

"Possibly not," was the answer.

"And now you are grateful. That's well, George, for I have offended, or half-offended, the rest of my friends for your sake."

"That was foolish."

"Oh, they can do without me, and you cannot," said Paul conceitedly, "that is where the difference lies. Besides, I feel myself in the way there; here, I hurt no one's sensibilities at present."

"At present?" repeated Hewitt.

Paul Essenden ran his hands through his wavy hair, pulled the ends of his long moustache, finally put his hands into his pockets, and looked down at the floor, vibrating with the agile feet of the dancers.

"Yes, George, at present," he said thoughtfully.

"Is it likely then, that you are going to wound our sensibilities?" asked the farmer.

"When there is a possibility of such a thing, old friend, I will give you fair warning," he said, looking in the other's face with his usual steadiness of gaze. "Perhaps it's nervousness or nonsense—there is no telling what comes into my rackety brain, and what business it has there."

"If it is anything serious, of course you will tell me."

"Serious," said Paul, with the first forced laugh in which he had indulged that evening; "oh, I did not say it was anything serious. I was never serious in my life—always joking, you know—and you may not like all my little jokes, for you're a bad-tempered fellow when your dignity is ruffled. Are you going to dance?"

"I dance!" cried Hewitt. "Well, no, I am not."

"I am—that is, I think I am," said Paul, "for the music stirs one, and one should set an example, and not look above those amusements in which these happy folk have been asked to take part. But I should like a good partner."

"Will Mr. Essenden take pity on a lady who is disengaged, then?" asked a musical voice at his side, and Paul swung himself round and found Miss Gifford at his elbow.

Though he had not seen her for many years, he was sure it was she. She had been a girl, home from boarding-school, when he had seen her last in her brother's pew at Wilton church, and now she was a woman of three-and-twenty, with a fair speaking face, that it was pleasant to gaze at. It was a face he liked at once, and though he coloured and stammered a little for an instant, he thought that he under-

stood it, and already loved it for his brother's sake. He wondered almost immediately why he had taken such pains to get out of its way.

"I am afraid Miss Gifford would not like to dance here," he said, bowing.

"We must not look above those amusements in which these happy folk have been asked to take part," she said, quoting his own words, after bowing to Mr. Hewitt, who bowed low in return, muttered a few words of welcome, and then walked away.

"Ah, but I have been getting up the fête."

"After my pattern, I think."

"I beg pardon—I had forgotten that for a moment. May I ask where Horace is?"

"Behind me, enjoying my unceremonious introduction to one who has taken so much pains to keep away from me," she said, laughing. "Horace, dear, I have found my future brother at last, and we are going to have one dance together to our better relationship."

"That is right," said Horace, stepping forwards. "Augusta was determined to face you in this fearless manner; she has threatened to do so all the evening."

"Miss Gifford knows, perhaps, that ceremony is out of my line," Paul said, "and this manner is my manner, and I like it. You see," he said, half apolo-

getically, "I did not know what you were exactly ; and being a minister's sister, and so on, I fancied that I should be of no earthly interest to you. Besides, there was plenty of time for us to meet, and——"

"There, there, Mr. Paul, I do not require your apologies. You are freely forgiven, and you must be my better friend in future."

"That I will," said Paul heartily.

"And here is my brother Theo anxious to make your acquaintance, and Mrs. Theo. Why, where are they?"

"I think they are with Mrs. Martin, looking in at the other barn," said Horace.

"Mr. Gifford thought that a few words would not be out of place on this occasion."

"Hang it," cried Paul, "but I think they will. It's no good at this hour of the night. Can't he bottle himself up till next Sunday, when the worst of them who want talking to will be coming round a bit? Oh, dear, I think I can hear him already!"

Yes, the Reverend Theobald Gifford had begun his address. Immediately after the last notes of the village band had ceased in the barn where they were standing, his deep sonorous voice attracted attention, and there was a slow movement towards the second barn, where the rector of Deeneford was holding forth. He was a man, we know, who always seized

the opportunity, or what he thought the opportunity, and he had paid his formal visit in order to give a few words of honest counsel to the harvesters ; to utter a few words of honest gratitude at the great harvest which that lucky summer had brought them. He had promised his sister that he would only say a few words, and that they should be to the purpose ; and, with his customary habit of settling matters speedily, he had begun at once, taking no heed of time or place, being perfectly convinced in his own mind how right he was.

And perhaps he was right, though there were many there of a different opinion, despite the gradual filling of the barn, partly out of curiosity, partly out of respect for the clergyman, who stood at the end of the long table on which supper was being laid, and delivered his harangue, with his wife and Mrs. Martin at his side as chief supporters. forcible and good words were they which fell from the lips of the preacher, delivered earnestly and eloquently, with the speaker's face lighted up, as it were, with the importance of his mission. He had heard of the harvest feasts in Deeneford too, and he congratulated them all on the first steps towards an improvement therein. He spoke of his own desire to see everybody happy on occasions like the present ; how he had not come there in any way to mar enjoyment, but

rather, if they would allow him, to promote it ; and how his heart felt gladdened with their own on that important night. There was no interruption to his discourse, though the few words had multiplied themselves into a great many, despite his desire to be as brief as possible. One man called out, "Brayvo, Parson," but that was only old Grey, who was being trundled out in a wheelbarrow to a favourite corner of a stable which he had occupied on harvest nights, without a single break, for three-and-forty years. He would as soon have left off going to church on Sunday mornings, as have given up his revelry on feast nights, for he was one of the old school, who spurned modern improvements, and loved the good practices of his forefathers.

Paul Essenden had followed with the rest of the community, and was standing at the door, half amused by Mr. Gifford's zeal and half annoyed at it. He had feared this when Horace had told him that the Giffords were going to patronise the harvest feast ; and sure enough the dancing was stopped, the smiles of the natives were quenched, and the guests were wondering whether this was a supplementary sermon thrown in between two Sundays surreptitiously.

"You don't like this ?" said Miss Gifford at his elbow again.

He started, and replied—

“What makes you think that?”

“By your serious face.”

“Well, a discourse of this character is a little out of place; it should have begun at an earlier hour, or wound up the proceedings, and sent us all miserable to bed—that is, if there was any necessity for it at all.”

“My brother thought that there was a necessity.”

“But you did not?” he said, turning quickly to read her countenance more accurately.

“I don’t say that, but I had my doubts how his address would be received; and as everybody is attentive and interested, why, honest Theo was a better judge of results than I am.”

“Ah, yes. Will he be much longer, do you think?”

“I can’t say. I think not.”

Paul strolled into the barn, and threaded his way through the knots of harvest folk to the side of Nella, who was listening attentively to the Reverend Theobald Gifford’s discourse.

“The next thing after the sermon is a quadrille,” he said in Nella’s ear; “I wanted you for a partner, and have secured Miss Gifford somehow.”

“Hush,” said Nella; “Mr. Gifford is speaking.”

“Yes, I know that, and I shall be glad when he leaves off.”

"Don't say that again," cried Nella petulantly.

"Why not?"

"I don't like to hear him spoken against by those who don't know him—don't understand him."

"Oh, I had forgotten that you went to church every Sunday now," replied Paul almost satirically.

"I wish you went," was the quick answer.

"Do you? I'll try and remember that wish," said he, after a moment's consideration. "It would be as great a novelty to see Paul Essenden in church, as Mr. Gifford at a harvest feast. You like this gentleman?"

"Yes."

"What favourites the clergymen always are with the women! The priest and the soldier take all the honours between them."

"If you don't care to listen to this beautiful address, Mr. Essenden," said Nella, "you might let me. Why don't you go away?"

"I'm going; I wouldn't interrupt your pleasure for the world;" and Paul Essenden walked out of the barn, rather aggrieved to find that there was no one to agree with him on the glaring inconsistency of Mr. Gifford's preaching. He was somewhat annoyed, too, at this sudden break in the amusements, this interruption to his own particular programme, and he walked once or twice round the

barns, thinking what a nuisance this Mr. Gifford was.

Here he came face to face with his friend George Hewitt, who was revolving round the barns also in a similar fashion.

"Hollo—what are you doing out here, Paul?"

"What are *you* doing out here, George?" was the rejoinder.

"Cooling myself and dodging the heat. And you?"

"Cooling myself and dodging the parson."

"Well, it is rather an unwarrantable intrusion to step into a man's house and preach a sermon," said Hewitt; "but I can bear a great deal from him, for all the ways about him that I don't like."

"Has he ever done you a service, then?"

"Yes, a good one. I don't like him, but I don't forget it."

"No, you are not the man," said Paul; "and though you might just as well consider yourself entitled to walk into his house and sing his friends a comic song, we will forgive his eccentricity for the sake of the help he has afforded George Carr."

"George Hewitt," said the other, correcting him.

"Right. I don't often make that mistake, but I feel drawn nearer to George Carr to-night."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't know what I mean exactly."

"Is there anything on your mind?" said Hewitt, pausing. "Is it anything to do with what you said earlier this evening?"

"How sharp you are," replied Paul. "Well, yes, it is."

"I wish you would tell me, for it is not worth while for you and me to be guessing at each other's meaning. You are an outspoken man."

"So they tell me. Well, old fellow, I'll speak out."

He passed his arm through George Hewitt's, and they commenced walking round the barns together.

"I said, George, that when there was a possibility of wounding your feelings I would give you fair warning, and then I turned it all into jest, because you looked at me as if you guessed what I was thinking about."

"Upon my honour, I did not."

"Well, I fancy that as there is no harm done yet, and as a hint in time will save you and me a great deal of trouble, we may as well understand each other. This is the beginning of a complication, without a fair exposition of the story, perhaps."

"Go on."

"You guess what I am going to say."

"I hate guessing at anything."

"Well, then, George, you'll be very much surprised to learn that during the last few weeks that I have been hanging about here—seeking every opportunity to come here—I have been falling in love with your niece Eleanor."

"So that is the secret," said Hewitt. "Well, go on. It's fair to tell me at the outset. Thank you, Paul."

"I was not aware of it myself until to-night," he said; "for I have been trying to laugh down, sneer down, and trample down such a preposterous idea as Paul Essenden thinking seriously of anybody. But I find I do. She's different to everybody whom I have known. There's more simplicity, true feeling, earnestness about her than girls of her age exhibit as a rule, and so my time has come, and I'm hit."

"And Nella—my niece, that is?"

"Has no more idea that I have a thought of her, than that I am in love with one of the old women in the almshouses. I have disguised that fact thoroughly—even taken a pleasure in going out of my way to aggravate her, rather than she should think that there was the ghost of a tender sentiment in me towards her."

"Because you did not know what she might think of it?"

"Rather because I did not know what you might think of it," was the answer.

"And now you wish to know?"

"Yes."

"You will not feel hurt, Paul, if I say No to this, for everybody's sake?" said Hewitt, slowly and hesitatingly. "Yours is a good family name, and such a match as you would contemplate would be a blow to the fine feelings of your friends."

"I am not called upon to study any one's fine feelings," said Paul. "I am my own master, and I must do what is best for myself, and what tends most to my own happiness. It is not all that nonsense," he said impatiently, "which perplexes me, it is the fact that I am falling in love with a rich man's niece, and that I have not a claim to make that is worthy of her attention. I have a bad character, I am moneyless, I don't see my future before me, and—worst of all, George—I don't believe she will ever care for me."

"Why tell me all this so precipitately?"

"Because I wish you to know it, not to reproach me at a future day with acting towards you—you of all men—treacherously. I want to begin to love her openly, to let her see what I am thinking about, and to take my chance of winning her. If I fail—which is most likely—why, I pack up my traps and march

my obnoxious self away. That is my idea ; but as you dash me down with No to begin with—if it's absolutely No—why, don't betray my confidence, and I'll be a trouble on your mind, George, for just one week longer."

"She is the only one for whom I care in the world," replied he ; "and I have never thought of her marrying. I cannot see her standing by any man's side and say, 'I take you for my husband.' For she knows now what I have been. I have concealed nothing from her, and indirectly, you see, she shares my disgrace, and is not fit for you. As for herself, well, though she has risen from a low estate, she is one of the best of women.

"I know that. I see her virtues, and understand her character."

"Ah, she's a good girl. Not highly educated, not a real lady."

"I don't like real ladies, George."

"Paul Essenden," said Hewitt, stopping to give more force to his words, "you don't know what you are asking me, or what temptation you are putting in my way. I tell you that I would die for that girl to-morrow—sacrifice everything on earth for her happiness—for the one chance of knowing what would become of her in the future days when I am gone. I would give all my money to make her

your wife—to persuade her to love you ; anything and everything to relieve me of the deep anxiety I feel for her. Beyond my time I see only a desolate woman plodding onwards from all that makes home and hallows it.”

“Give me the word to win her, then. Set that ambition before me, and see what a man I can become.”

“I believe you can ; I have had always faith in you, and you have been always good to me,” said Hewitt, hesitating still ; “but the whole thing is impossible. You might conquer me by argument—persuade me to that which may be best for her, but worst for you ; talk me over by your satire against the sphere to which you belong, tell me that your tastes are mine rather than theirs, and that you love Eleanor as she deserves to be loved, prove to me that with your trustful nature and good temper she could not have a better husband ; but there would be no conquering her will.”

“Why not ?”

“My niece will never marry.”

“Will you give me the opportunity to try whether I cannot shake her resolution ?”

“Looking at her as she stands before us, a good and pious girl, and thinking nothing, caring nothing for her past and mine ?” Hewitt asked.

“Why should I care?”

Mr. Hewitt considered for a few minutes, and then said suddenly and almost fiercely—

“Do your best, then. Against my own common sense I say, win her if you can.”

“George, you are my best friend still,” cried Paul warmly.

“Or your greatest enemy,” he answered, “for there will be something more to confess before you marry her, and that may daunt even you.”

“Not that. But I don’t believe she will ever think of me,” said Paul, suddenly becoming full of fears as to the magnitude of the task before him. “No woman ever liked me yet, and why should the best of them begin to do anything so foolish? But you give me my chance?”

“Ay, Paul—and wish you God-speed.”

Then the two men went into the barn together, and found that the dancing had recommenced, and that the Reverend Theobald Gifford had long since concluded those few remarks which he had thought suitable for the occasion.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTEENTH.

"ONE MORE OF THEM."

THEY were thinking of another dance before supper when Paul Essenden and his friend entered the great barn. The musicians, a violin, a flute, and a bass viol from Kliston, were tuning up again, those who could dance a quadrille were pairing off and forming into sets, and those who could not were securing the best posts of observation to see the gentlefolk and their more accomplished contemporaries "show off a bit."

"I wonder what has become of my partner?" Augusta Gifford was saying when Paul re-entered the barn.

"Your partner, Augusta," said her brother, who was standing by her side along with his wife, Mrs. Martin, and Horace Essenden; "why, you are not going to dance, surely?"

"Yes, I think so."

Mr. Gifford elevated his eyebrows in mild surprise. He was anxious that the village folk should amuse

themselves, and saw no particular harm—although he disliked dancing as a rule—in their enjoying themselves after their own fashion. Anything was better than the deep drinking; and although, had he thought of the matter weeks ago, he would have suggested a lecture with experiments, or an astronomical discourse, with instructive diagrams, still, it was too late to interfere, and everybody seemed happy enough. But he was not prepared for his set taking a prominent part in the festivities; he had said in his address that he was anxious to promote the guests' enjoyment, and he meant by that that he would wait with his friends till supper was over, and warm everybody's heart by his smiles and patronage.

"I did not know that you were fond of dancing, Augusta," he said gravely.

"I don't know that I am, Theo; but I have been deeply impressed by a remark of one of the visitors this evening."

"Indeed. What was it?"

"That we should set an example here, and not look above those amusements which these happy folks have been asked to take part in. I was so struck with the sense of that reflection, and of what a bore our patronage must be to these good souls, that I asked the speaker to dance with me immediately."

"Good gracious," ejaculated Mr. Gifford, "you are getting more eccentric than ever, Augusta. I—I really don't think that it looks well for the sister of the rector to be dancing in a barn along with these villagers. What do you think, Horace, of this extraordinary idea?"

"I am very much surprised, Mr. Gifford," said Horace drily; "and so was the gentleman whom she asked to dance with her."

"Yes, I have no doubt he was," said the rector, still bewildered, and failing to see that there was a little jest at the bottom of all this, for he, good soul, had never understood jesting, and was always methodical and practical.

And here he is," exclaimed Miss Gifford. "Why, where have you been, you truant?"

Mr. Gifford was still more surprised at this familiar address of his sister, till Mrs. Martin touched his arm and said—

"This is my nephew, Paul, who has taken a great interest in the harvest fête. You will like his straightforwardness—you will like him altogether in time, for he has wonderfully improved."

The good lady was anxious that Mr. Gifford should see her nephew in the best light; still more anxious that Paul should treat the clergyman with a fair amount of reverence, and not shock him by

any rude remarks. She had been boasting a little of the prodigal's amendment, for she had been touched by his frankness, his new respect for her—even by his independence, which stood aloof from seeking favours, lest she should think that he had come back for a place in her will. She was a lady who would be at peace with her kindred, and love them all if they would let her, and they would love her a little in return, and she had been happier since this last one had returned to Deeneford a different and a better man.

“Paul,” she said, in a low tone, as he advanced, “Mr. Gifford has been desirous of an introduction to you for some time. Your best behaviour, sir, to please the old aunt for once.”

“My very best, then.”

He was in the best of spirits, and so could afford to show forth his best manners. He had had permission accorded to make love to the only woman whom he had ever thought worth loving, and whatever the result might be, he was pleased enough for that night. It was a step forwards from his desultory self and his unprofitable life—it was giving him a hope and an ambition, and he had not cared for anything before then. Presently, he thought, he should have to wound the old lady's pride very deeply by telling her that he was going to study

his own happiness before anybody else's ; he should be informed that he was disgracing his connections, and then there would be feelings hurt, and perhaps a few sharp words interchanged before he went away for good. Now let him study his aunt a little, so that in the far-off time, when he was apart from her again, she might think that he had not been disobedient to every wish, and that he had striven to please her now and then.

"I am honoured by an introduction to a gentleman of Mr. Gifford's ability and repute," he said, with a low bow over the hand that was extended to him. "I have to thank Mr. Gifford also for his kindness in coming this evening, and for his eloquent address to our visitors."

"Pray do not mention it," said Mr. Gifford, bowing in his turn, and thinking that this elder Essenden was a very gentlemanly young fellow. Paul, anxious to do his best, and show how amiable he was, was even disposed to add a few more compliments to the rector concerning that address, when he caught the shrewd glance of Miss Gifford, and was silent.

"It struck me and Augusta," said Horace, "that you were more than ordinarily attentive to Mr. Gifford's remarks."

"Yes—yes, I believe I was," stammered Paul.

"And—— Why, surely this is Mrs. Gifford—the Laura Masdale that was—the old playmate before I went away from Wilton?"

Mrs. Gifford coloured at this hearty salutation, and appeared scared for a moment by its suddenness; then she put forth her hand, and looked timidly towards him.

"I am glad to see you again, Mr. Essenden," she said.

"Thank you. I hope that we shall have many a long talk over the old times before these two are married," indicating Horace and Augusta. "I shall see Horace comfortably settled before I leave him."

"You do not intend a long stay, then?" asked the rector.

"I am afraid I could not stay a long while anywhere."

"And here there is no very strong inducement to stay," said Mrs. Martin, with a half sigh.

"Oh, but there is," Paul exclaimed. "Why, there's Horace always."

"What an inducement," said the poet, shrugging his shoulders. He was in a half-pensive mood that evening, and looked as though Mr. Gifford's address had been a little too much for him.

"I think it is time we took our places in this first

set," said Paul, and Augusta Gifford being of the same opinion, away he went with his partner. It was an animated first set, and those who watched the one pair of gentlefolk figuring there, thought what a nice couple they made, and what a deal they had to say to one another.

Those two understood each 'other very fairly to begin with. They were to be intimately allied, and hence no formality stood in the way. And their one subject of conversation during the opportunities which the dance allowed was of Horace Essenden and of those manifold virtues with which they both credited him; how clever he was, how warm-hearted he was, how handsome he was—all of which was true enough, and yet the man was less a hero than any one of that assembly, and less worthy of hero-worship. Augusta Gifford could speak of Horace to his brother as she could not speak to any one else, for she had heard of Paul's affection for him.

"How she loves him," thought Paul to himself; "what a wife she will make him, and what a good job for everybody that Laura Masdale is married and out of the way!"

Meanwhile Horace, with his aunt leaning on his arm, was promenading the room, and Mr. Gifford and his wife stood watching the dancing.

"I think I shall like this new Essenden," said Mr. Gifford thoughtfully; "there is something in his face which wins upon one. He is not unlike his brother, but older looking certainly."

"I don't like him much," said Mrs. Gifford; "he is too familiar—over friendly, in fact."

"Perhaps he is," assented her husband, "and those over-friendly folks are always shallow-hearted, for all their demonstrativeness. I was not aware, Laura, that you were very intimate with the Essendens at Wilton."

Mrs. Gifford looked down.

"Not very intimate, certainly, but we were neighbours, and saw each other now and then when the holidays came round, and I was back from boarding-school."

"Horace has spoken of this Paul often enough," said Mr. Gifford, "and always with considerable feeling, as though he feared what would become of him eventually. Now, it's very strange that I should think the gentleman opposite the stronger character of the two, and one calculated to take his own part in the world better than his brother. Horace," he added confidentially, "I have always fancied a little weak."

"Indeed," was the low answer.

"A man who might be led away, perhaps," said

Mr. Gifford, "for he is proud of his literary abilities, and ranks them higher than the world does, taking exaggerated ideas of everything, and always an enthusiast. Not that I dislike him for his earnestness, Laura; on the contrary, I respect him very much—as much," he added gravely, "as he respects me."

Mrs. Gifford did not reply. She still looked sadly down at the floor, and had Mr. Gifford been attentively regarding her, he might have perceived that her lip quivered for an instant. But his attention was directed to a new subject of interest, to a strange face peering in at the open door eagerly and watchfully. He thought that he knew everybody in Deeneford, even to the reapers and harvesters who had been lodging in the village for the last three weeks, but this wild face was new to him.

"My dear," he said suddenly, "I suppose you don't know that person?"

Mrs. Gifford looked in the direction indicated by her husband.

"No," she said, with a shudder, "I don't know her. What an awful face it is."

She clung more tightly to her husband's arm as she gazed in that direction, for she was a woman whose nerves were not strong, and who was easily influenced. It was a face that might have scared a

stronger woman than she—a dark, repulsive, eager face, seamed, and ugly, and old, with small ferret-like eyes, which glittered like a serpent's in the lamplight. A face that Nella had seen in fever-dreams, and that even looked through the curtains of her bed at times and dismayed her with its semblance to reality.

And yet scarcely this face, for this was more sallow and repulsive in its hideousness than even her dreams had imagined, or it had seemed possible that years could change it to.

The eyes, taking stock of everything from the door, became speedily aware of Mr. Gifford's attention, and blinked once or twice at the clergyman, like an owl's; then an aged woman came with feeble steps into the barn, leaning heavily upon an old umbrella as she advanced, and clutching the wall with one disengaged and yellow claw.

"A beggar," murmured Mr. Gifford. "She would be better in the workhouse at her age than tramping through the country."

The woman came close to them, and peered into Mr. Gifford's face. Laura shrank back a step or two as she advanced.

"You needn't be so scared, young lady; there's nuffin catching about me you can tell your darter, sir," she said, with a subdued snarl at the rector.

"What do you want, my good woman?" he inquired.

"Thankee, your honour, I see you know me, and a good woman I am, and have always borne the best of karacters, and never knowed what it was to have a finger of scorn pinted at me. And yet I've seen heaps of trouble, and am very old and grey now."

"Do you require relief from the parish?" asked Mr. Gifford. "I am not in the habit of distributing money without inquiry, but——"

"But I'd wait till I was axed for it, sir; or you might hurt the feelings of those who were 'titled to respex, as you have done jest now. Not meaning it, o' course, and so not taking any manner of offence. I've called to see a friend, that's all—a dear young friend of mine, whose uncle keeps this fine brave farm. Oh, the likes of him lording it over people in this style!"

"You—you don't know Miss Hewitt?" asked Mrs. Gifford, in her astonishment.

"Yes, I do—at least, I hope I do, or else there's been a trick played on me, which some people will suffer for," she said, looking fiercely round her. "I know the gal—nothin' to her harm, o' course; the best of gals, and allers has been—who says different?"

"No one contradicts you," said Mr. Gifford calmly.

"'Xactly, and no one—— Now, good parson of this outlandish hole, as gord's truth you know," she cried, clutching Mr. Gifford suddenly and uncere-
moniously by the arm, "isn't that Nella—that tall gal coming in from the other door there?"

"That is Miss Hewitt, certainly."

"Ha, ha!" croaked Mrs. Wisby, setting herself in motion once more, and dragging herself slowly and painfully away from them, "she's found at last, then, and I'm a lucky woman."

CHAPTER THE EIGHTEENTH.

UNDER THE ELMS.

NELLA CARR, alias Eleanor Hewitt, had entered the barn to announce the news that supper would be ready after the next dance. At the door she paused to watch the dancers, betraying a great interest in the last figure of the quadrille, and dreaming not of the one weird figure from her old life slowly and steadily approaching her like a fate that there was no evading. With the rest of the village folk, Nella was interested in the set in which Paul Essenden and Augusta Gifford danced, and she stood and watched them thoughtfully, even sorrowfully, as creatures of a world apart from hers, and yet to whom her heart was drawn. They were not looking in her direction; they were talking and laughing together as though they had been friends all their lives, and the sorrowful expression deepened on Nella's face as she gazed at them. Of what was she thinking in that hour, with her past so close upon her, with the mistress of her old school—Wisby's

- school, where crime was taught in easy lessons, and rare prizes given to those who excelled therein—scarcely a hand's grasp from hers? What gave that earnest, sad look to her thoughtful face, and heaved the bosom with a sigh?

Was it a thought of her own isolation from them both, or a regret for the strange position of Augusta Gifford, tricked into an engagement with, and taught to love a man unworthy of her? or was there an idea concerning Paul Essenden crossing her mind at that moment, a faint idea that he was more worthy of Augusta than his brother, and would have made a better husband, had he not stepped upon the scene too late in life, and thus lost her for ever?

At all events, she murmured "Poor Paul" at last, as though she had been interested in that erratic genius, and then hurried away in search of Mr. Hewitt. At the same moment she became aware of a husky voice calling out her name, and she paused, looked back, and saw Mrs. Wisby at last.

"Heaven's mercy on me! can it be?" she whispered to herself, as she felt a strange tightening in her chest, a difficulty in breathing, a death-like, horrible feeling, which grew more intense as she grew more convinced of the reality advancing to her.

Mrs. Wisby came on feebly, a woman bent with age and infirmity—a sallow-faced, deeply lined old

hag, whose chance of escaping the stake in King James's time would have been an exceedingly bad one. She almost groped her way, with one claw extended by way of greeting, the other clasping the handle of her old green gingham umbrella, which was of material assistance to her in her progress.

"My own dear gal that is—that was—to think that our 'appy meeting has come upon us both, and arter all these years! It's like a play, my Nella!"

"You, you are——" began Nella, and could go on no further.

"Yes, that's right, I'm Mrs. Wisby—the old mother—Mother Wisby, as the scamps have called me all my life, loving me enuf, but showing no particular court. The mother," she said, sinking her voice into a whisper, "who you cut away from in Jiner's Lane, without saying a good-bye to—who wished you well with all her 'art, and stuck by you, and, s'elp her sacred life, never would have blowed upon you about Grayling's, if you'd sarved her well. But you didn't—but——"

"Say no more here, please," said Nella, interrupting her. "This is no place for you to enter, or for me to listen to you. Come with me."

"Oh, yes, I'll come with you, but don't go rushing off like this to begin with. Stop, I say, Nella Carr; you can't go on at that rate."

Nella stopped as the wild scream rang in her ears, and looked round with alarm at the guests, who seemed all very busy and very happy, totally unconscious concerning the tragedy which had risen up in their midst.

"I think, my dear, if I was jest to take your arm," said Mrs. Wisby, and Nella shuddered as the thin, hard hand was passed through her arm accordingly. It was drawing her nearer to the old times at once, and in that awful companionship she could believe that she had dreamed through all her better life, and this was waking up to truth at last. Ah, what a happy dream it had been !

"Where are you a-taking me?"

"Away from this house—to the close, where we can speak in safety, and you can say what you want with me."

"I'd rather go in-doors, where it is warmer."

"No," said Nella firmly. "It's an honest home, and you shan't enter it."

"I don't see how you could stop me—whether you'd have the impudence to stop me, if I said I'd go," said Mrs. Wisby, halting for an instant to snarl forth her defiance, and display two long yellow front fangs, which were all that time had left her, "for I think I'm missus here, and can have my say as well as you. Oh, the fine talk of an honest home

too, and the great lady we've growed since we broke prison last!"

"You would prefer to tell me what you want without witnesses, I suppose. And we have many guests to-night."

"And you would prefer to hear me, I'll be bound," Mrs. Wisby said, with a feeble croak, "and so we hits it, both on us. Well, it's a fine night, and not cold for Orgust, and I never rides contrairy, on'y when druv to it by people who can't humour me. And when druv, Nella," she said, as her hand tightened on the arm it clutched, "I don't know a bigger devil."

"How did you find me out?" asked Nella.

"Oh, I finds out everythink I wants to find," was the evasive answer, "and lots of folks helps me to spot my friends. You know that Sally's been in this part of the country, p'raps?"

"Yes, I was told of that."

"The fool she is—the fool that gal will ever be, good lor!" cried Mrs. Wisby, full of disgust and pity: "to find you out, and then to go away and never ax you for a sixpence to help her on her journey! She's in quod again, and I don't pity her."

"In prison—oh, poor woman!"

"Her brat caught cold through sleepin' in the open air along with its fool of a mother, who woke

up one mornin' and found it as dead as a nit. She went clean mad then, and took to drinking hard—werry hard—so I was 'bliged to cut her company, and direkly I cut her, she was caught—as I told her, all along ; I told her what she'd come to, and o' course she did. Through this gate?"

"Yes."

"A pretty walk for an old 'ooman at my time of life, who's had two cussed strokes too since she saw you last," she said. "It's as if I'd nothin' better nor to do than to put up with your whims. But it's to show you that I mean fair, Nella—that even now, and after all your orful shabbiness, I'm 'clined to be your friend, unless you tries to get the upper hand of me, and then I does my wust."

"What do you want?" asked Nella.

"On'y luv, and simperfy, and confidence, my beauty ; nuffin more than that."

"You think that I am in your power, then?"

"I'm sure on it."

"I am not so sure," replied Nella, as they paused in the shadow of some great elms standing out in black relief against the moonlight ; "and I am not the child to be terrified any longer by your threats. To your scandal, to your accusations, I can show my present life ; and I am too well known, too much respected, for any one to believe a word that you can

hiss against me. Therefore, try and understand that I have no fears to be preyed upon, and that there is not a market for you here. If you think of dogging my steps and haunting me, hoping by those means to extort money for your silence, lay this to heart, that I would rather have your enmity, and prefer to meet that 'worst' with which you threaten me; but if you will go away—go away for ever from me—I will, for the sake of peace,—for my uncle's sake—come to terms with you if I can."

"The last few words air the o'ny sensible ones I've heerd yet," said Mrs. Wisby, "and I s'pose you wouldn't have brought me to this nasty place, with all these frogs a-hopping about us, if you hadn't a-knowned how much better it was to help me than to talk big words which aggerewate one in trying to understand 'em, and which never do a bit o' good. Well, I want money. I've been unfortenit—I've been turned out of Jiner's Lane; and, would you b'lieve it in our feller-critters, but I was robbed wholesale and of everythink right afore my eyes, when I had my last stroke, and lay in bed with my mouth all o' one side, jest as if I was a-larfing at 'em doing it. No one has ever sarved me downright well, and yet I've been true to all on 'em; never was in a witness-box against one of 'em in all my life, and was allers ready to swear, or get a friend to

swear, anythink they wanted of me ; and so my good natur' has been imposed upon, and here I am a beggar a'most. If it wasn't for the few friends left, Nella, I might as well sell matches, or turn into one of them orful workuses."

"How much money do you want to go away for good—never to come in this direction again in all your life?"

"All you've got in your pocket, to begin with."

"That is not much," said Nella, producing a small purse, which she dropped into Mrs. Wisby's hands; "a few shillings and a half-sovereign, I think."

"They're worth having, thankee," said Mrs. Wisby, stowing away the purse carefully in a pocket that was almost bottomless, she stooped so low, and went so much on one side before she was certain that her money was safely deposited; "and I've been hard up lately—oh! you wouldn't believe how hard up, if I was to waste your time in telling you. Well, Nella Carr, I think we makes each other out pretty well."

"Yes," said Nella.

"I won't come ever any more after to-morrow morning, or may my third stroke whisk me off afore the daylight; and that's speaking serious, for I like life, and have lots to do in it yet. I'm fair—I'm allers fair, when fair dealt with; ask anybody," she

reiterated, with a strange, but evidently a real pride in her dealings with her kind, "and they'll say that Mother Wisby's as true as steel. Now, tell that father of yours—not your uncle, mind—that I know you as well as I know him, and that, when my husband was alive, and it was really Wisby's School in earnest, he was a pet scholar, and one of the cleverest and deepest. Tell him that he needn't have played me his last trick, but might have been more fairer with me, and no harm done. Tell him that I'm here, and for fifty pounds, not more, not less, I'll never come this way agin, and never think of the twenty pounds that I can earn, I dare say, by pointing you out to a policeman. I'd rather serve a friend at any time than the magistrates and judges, and so I'll come round at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning for the money."

"I will deliver your message to him."

"Greedy people would have asked for a hundred, two hundred, and have got it, and then turned up agin and agin, and allers when they wasn't wanted; but that aint my way. You know what I am; he knows what I am: afore you was born, my Nella, he knowed me, and trusted in me."

"You may tell others, as Sally has told you."

"Oh, no, no, no," elevating her umbrella and her disengaged hand in protest against this supposition.

"The grave shan't keep me quieter than the fifty suverins which Mr. Hewitt—we'll say Hewitt, for perliteness' sake—will shell out in the morning."

"What will you do with the money?" said Nella, regarding the woman with a wondering interest.

"Start afresh," croaked Mrs. Wisby, with new eagerness. "Set up another school somewhere—in Liverpool, I think, for the sake of the fresh air. Get round me, out of the street, where there are allers heaps and heaps of 'em, little gals like you were wunst, and train 'em up with care to arn their livin' early."

"Oh, great heaven!" cried Nella, putting her fingers to her ears, "don't talk like this, and you so close upon the judgment! Woman, at the last, can't you turn away and be more like a woman? If you cannot think of heaven and of heaven's mercy, do no further harm to outcasts like myself, whom even chance might save from wrong if such wretches as you were not near to tempt them—to tell them that evil was good, and that the poor and friendless can only live by following your teachings. No, no, you shall not have the money; I would rather be found out and dragged away; say that again, and I swear you shall not have it!"

"Highly tighty!" exclaimed Mrs. Wisby, in-

tensely astonished at this outburst; "how you fire up! What's all this about?"

"I have been one of them; I know how ignorant and how easily led they are, and how no one good, and pure, and Christian-like comes to save them at the right time, but keeps away from the darkness of our streets. Oh, to be of more use in the world, if it were possible!"

"We'll call my last little remark a joke, my dear," said Mrs. Wisby soothingly; "on course I'm not a-going to begin agin, and was on'y a-trying to see what you'd think of it, knowing how you'd altered. No, I'm a-going to Amerikey to see a darter of mine who's getting on werry well, I hear, and who'll be kind to me for my remaining years."

"You will go away now?"

"Yes; and you'll let your father know what time I am coming to-morrow, and what I'm coming for."

"Certainly."

"Unless this is my genelman coming across the field here, when I'll let him know myself," said Mrs. Wisby, whose sharp eyes had been the first to detect a man advancing towards them in the moonlight. Nella peered in the direction indicated, and said—

"Yes, it is he, I think. Had you not better go away at once?"

"What have I to be afeard on in George Carr? It is he who should be afeard of me, I reckon."

"He is a passionate man, and the surprise may be too much for him."

"Not that."

"I will go and meet him, then," said Nella; "stay here one moment."

Nella ran across the dew-laden grass towards her father, who said as she came up with him—

"I was told that you had come in this direction, and yet could not believe it. What is the matter, Nella—are you ill? Has any one offended you?"

"No, no. I have brought one here out of the way who has the power to do us harm, and who has come for money for her silence——"

"Another one," said Hewitt, with a groan; "well, I have given up trying to hide away from them all. Who is this?"

"Mrs. Wisby, of the Joiner's Lane—before that time of Whitechapel, where all the crime began of which we have repented."

"Of which we have repented, and yet by which we are ever haunted," said Hewitt. "What are you looking at?"

"How pale you have turned."

"It is the moonlight, Nella," he answered, "and perhaps the shock of the surprise, a little. I don't

know—I am calm enough now to face this old wretch, and do my best to buy her silence. How much does she want?”

“Fifty pounds.”

“It will be cheap at that.”

He stopped, and she stopped with him.

“You can go back,” he said. “The people are wondering what has become of you, and I am less likely to be missed than you. They are sitting down to supper. Tell them a friend has called upon important business, which cannot be postponed, if any one asks you where I am.”

“I would rather stay with you.”

“And set a hundred people talking about us,” said Hewitt. “Leave this wretch to me.”

“You—you will not hurt her? She is very old and feeble, father, and the past to which she belongs is far away, thank God, from both of us!”

“What made you think that I should do her harm?”

“I—I don’t think you will, but you are a passionate man, and a word might excite you in your present state. Forgive me, but—I—I am afraid.”

“Nella,” he said gravely, “my word and honour that I will not harm her, that she passes away from here to do all the mischief that she can, perhaps, and that I will not seek to stop her. Now go after all those

people, and keep their tongues still by filling their mouths ; and," he added, after a pause, "think a little better of me, and let your thoughts of the father do him more justice now and then."

"Oh, forgive me, dear ; I know how wrong it was, but your face changed so terribly !"

"Well it might, for that matter, considering the news you brought me. There, Nella, forgiven, dear, with all my heart."

He kissed her forehead, and then walked on towards the shadowy trees beneath which Mrs. Wisby waited, and from which Nella was hastening away.

CHAPTER THE NINETEENTH.

TRUE TO HER SCHOOL.

THE owner of the Upland Farm went slowly into the shadows, and found the old woman waiting there.

"Good-evening, George Carr," she said, extending her hand, which he did not take, however. "I hope that this is the last game of hide-and-seek which we shall play together. You got the best of me four years ago ; now I think it's one to me."

"You were always a cunning woman," said he moodily, "and I have been afraid of you in consequence. So you have found me out."

"Yes. Why have you sent your darter away in such a hurry ?"

"She is wanted at the farm."

"Then I'm not going to stop here," she said, limping into the moonlight, and evincing more alacrity than she had hitherto exhibited. "I'm off nearer to that house, where, if I skreek, they'll hear me."

"You are afraid of me, then?"

"Oh, I know what an awful customer you can be," said Mrs. Wisby, keeping up her rate of progression, "and what bad blood's in you when things aint to your liking. It's not the first time I've met with George Carr, or knowed what he could do. He was transported for fourteen years for buglerry with wiolence, and the wiolence nearly killed his man."

"Yes," said Hewitt, "you know all; and I have worked out my sentence, and am back again, with all the bad blood in me still, for all the better man I have become. Now listen to me, and try and make me out. Did you ever know me tell a lie?"

"No."

"Then you are safe—safer than you were five minutes since, when it struck me that it was best to kill you, and so make an end of it."

"Make an end of me, you mean," said Mrs. Wisby, shivering; "well, that's cool and kind!"

"You have sought me out—not I you, and I am dangerous."

"Yes, I know that. What a fool I was to be 'ticed into a place like this. I don't believe they'd hear me if I was to skreek, even now."

"Not they, they are too noisy within doors, and too full of themselves; but you are safe enough, and whatever you say or do, Mother Wisby, will not

bring harm to your grey hairs. My first impulse is over, and it is the first impulse that is always a bad one with me."

"Werry good—then I won't go so fast. I'm not used to going on at this rate, and it ketches my breath orfully, and makes my side ache. How well you're looking, Mr. Carr, to be sure."

"Not that I see what use you are in the world," he said, without taking heed of the old lady's compliment, "but rather how the world might profit by your absence. For you are a reptile, not a woman; and were you to live a hundred years there could come no repentance to you, only more sin and greed, and more young souls cut adrift by your infernal reasoning. A reptile in my path, whose life I could crush out and feel no compunction afterwards—rather feel that I was the instrument of an avenging Maker!"

He was strangely excited, and his voice came thick and guttural, and was not pleasant to listen to.

"We'll come a leetle nearer to the house, I think," said Mrs. Wisby, setting off at a brisk, ungraceful trot again—"through that there gate, at all ewents. Good lor, and what a bully you are, George Carr, still!"

"My name is Hewitt here."

"Hewitt, as you say. You needn't fly into a

passhun if I says George Carr, which is nat'ral enough," said Mrs. Wisby. "I haven't come to quarrel, or to have a quarrel picked with me—on'y to say that I'm werry poor, and out of luck, and that a rich friend like you must afford to help me."

"You want fifty pounds to keep your tongue still?"

"I don't say that," said Mrs. Wisby, "for I hates sneaks, and I would not be one myself unless druv to it by raging hunger—tempted by the reward which, I dare say, as the law goes, I could get easy enough. Oh, no, not to skeer you into buying me off in any way; we don't turn against our own school, and in my husband's time you was one of us. One of Wisby's wunst is allers one of Wisby's—that's our rule. Whilst the mark lasts, we stick by one another, and that's why I've come to you."

"You're very kind," said Hewitt drily.

"No, it's you as will be that," was the sharp answer; "for I'm in trouble, and you aint. The school's broke up, and on'y one or two air left to be of comfort to each other in the dark days. You can afford an old 'ooman fifty punds?"

"To come here never again—to keep that woman Sally away, to tell no one where I am or where my daughter is, but to leave us always to ourselves, here or elsewhere?"

"You may put it in that light if you likes," said Mrs. Wisby plaintively; "however hurtful to one's sense of pride it is, I'll take it as you put it. I never go where I'm not wanted, where my friends air not glad to see me, and to wish me well. When can I have the money?"

"Directly. Pass round to the front of the farmhouse when you leave me, and stand by the left-hand window till it opens, and the money is passed out to you. Then take yourself away—you understand?"

"It's all as clear as them there stars," said Mrs. Wisby, "and for ever from this time, George, I'll put you fust man in my prayers."

They were close upon the farm, and the noisy laughter from the revellers welled into the night from the open doors, where the light and life were. The woman's courage, which had for awhile deserted her, returned when she felt safe, and she looked fearlessly and mockingly into the sterner face that met her own.

"Have you ever prayed in your life?" asked Hewitt.

"No—have you?"

"Yes, a great deal lately, and for another's sake, not for mine," he answered. "There, that is something for you to think about and puzzle over."

"Ay, it is—George Carr upon his knees squaring accounts with the hivins that'll never, never have anything to do with him."

"Likely enough," answered Hewitt. "Don't I tell you that it's for another's sake."

"The gal inside there?"

"Yes."

"If you'd been as fond of her when she was a kid, and not have left her to us so much, it might have been sumfink to brag about. But," she said with a disparaging sniff, "I don't think much on it now myself."

"I think of her, I live for her, and what affects her will influence me for good or evil. Now, woman, with all your life's enormities upon that face of yours, don't forget what I am going to tell you."

He leaned towards her and clasped her arm, and she glanced once more towards the barns, still doubtful of her safety. She did not like this new George Carr; this was not the man whom she had expected to find, and whom she had ever known. The old George Carr she had been prepared for—a desperate but vacillating bully, to be mastered by his fears; but this man was new, strange, and hard, and she felt glad that it had all ended profitably for her.

"Is it worth while saying any more?"

"Yes."

"Go on, then. I'd rather have your money than your talk, George, but if it's to do with the business, look sharp."

"You said that I should be the first man in your prayers, Mother Wisby: make me so, if you dream of interfering here. Pray that you may never meet me again in all your wretched life, for it will be my business then to find you out, and to dog you step by step, as you have done Nella and me. Betray her after taking this hush-money, come again on any pretext whatever after this night, and heaven have mercy on you and keep you from the bitterest enemy that ever sought to strike you down."

He pointed to the farm looming before them with its background of grey, moonlit sky, and moved away from her, walking sharply and swiftly round to the small paved yard at the back, and then passing through the dairy and kitchen into the house. There were lights in the kitchen, and one scullery wench asleep there whilst her equals kept high holiday. He took a light from the dresser without waking her, and went up-stairs into his room, where he remained a few minutes, and came down with some bank-notes crumpled in his hand.

He extinguished the light, went into the farmhouse parlour, and opened the window softly.

"Are you there?" he called, but no answer was returned, and he stood reflecting upon this new phenomenon.

"She cannot possibly have gone away without the money," he muttered. "And she is not a woman to be frightened to death by any words of mine. Wisby," he called again.

"Coming, George, dear, coming," the voice of the old woman responded to this last appeal. "Do you think all the world is as strong and quick as you are?"

"Where have you been? You should have been here before."

"Ah, she hasn't told you of the strokes I have had, one arter the other—clean floorers, and left like a log of wood in my bed, and lumped about, in and out at times as though I'd been one. We don't walk at your rate in these unlucky days."

"I thought that you had met Nella, or some one."

"Nella's werry fond o' me, but it wasn't likely for her to come galloping out of the supper-room to say good-bye."

"Here is the money."

"Fifty punds?"

"No, a hundred. To show that I serve you fairly, and expect fairplay back again. A foul act in return for this, and I will be as doubly hard as now I am doubly liberal."

"You may trust me, George," said Mrs. Wisby, seizing the money. "Bless you, George, for this surprise—it's all surprises in this part of the country—and I shall be glad to get back to my quiet crib away from 'em. Trust the old mother, from this day, for may I die direkly I turn against you, or think wrong of either you or Nella. This is like a genelman, George, and I fancy that you'll go to hivin now, for the old and poor you take to your buzzum, and share your money with. Bless you both, and keep you from harm, is all I wish, though, if I cared for Nella, I wouldn't stay in England, if I was you, for any money."

"I don't want advice," muttered the farmer.

"All right, I'll say nuffink more but bless you. Straight away from here I go, and never, never to light on you ever any more, George, as I'm an old 'ooman who never turned upon a pal that did the hansum by her. How the luvly moon shines to-night to be sure, and makes one's 'art heave for a better spear. Good-bye, old cove; I'm glad we part the best of friends, as we have been allers—as we keep for ever."

She tucked her umbrella under her arm, and spread out both her withered hands towards the house in a wild, spasmodic fashion, which rendered her in the moonlight more like a witch than ever.

"Good luck to George Carr's house," she said, and then turned and went limping along the garden-path towards the high road, which she reached, and then went on again, after carefully closing the gate behind her.

Hewitt was still standing by the window, when some one touched him in the darkness.

"Keep back!" he cried with excitement. "Who is it?"

"It is I, father," whispered Nella. "I was anxious about you, and came in search of you. You are not yourself; you are afraid of me?"

"No; not now."

"Can we believe her, do you think?" asked Nella. "Is it worth while to wait here, with the clue in her hands to our disgrace?"

"She has given me the same hint, but we are safe for a time, and presently we will steal away. That poor loathsome wretch, who has worked so much evil in her day, prides herself on the one virtue of faithfulness to those who are faithful to her."

"You think that we can trust her?"

"Had I thought otherwise she would have been lying dead under the elms in the home-close."

"Oh, no, no; not that, for mercy's sake!"

"You must be always safe—the prison and you for ever apart, like earth and heaven. And we are not quite safe here."

"Let us go away at once."

"Giving up these Giffords whom you love so much, and for whom I fancy, sometimes, you would die—these gods of Deeneford?"

"Yes; giving up everybody but you."

"Ah, that may not be necessary," he said, passing his arm round her waist, and moving with her to the door; "we know not what may happen to give a turn to our lives, and let in the brightness, Nella."

"Is not the brightness already around us?"

"Looking back upon the past from which we have escaped, it seems so," he answered; "we could not look towards this from the lower ground when we were desolate and despairing, but it was here awaiting us."

"Yes; heaven's blessing on our efforts to amend, father."

"Ay, let us think so, and keep strong."

"Are we not strong already?"

"Strong in our faith to rise still higher, to a

something better than this life even, with more true hearts to keep ours light in the good time ahead of both of us."

He was thinking of Paul Essenden, and all that had been told him on that memorable night. It was his first hint to Nella that there might be a fair hope before her, and that at least it lay in her power to accept or reject it. She could not or would not understand him, for in her heart she had mapped out her future, and believed herself strong enough to follow it unto that end where all earthly futures close. She dreamt not of marriage, or of being given in marriage; it was not her part in life—it stretched beyond her and was for honest folk, who had no past to scare them, and nothing to keep under ban and interdict, lest righteous folk should shrink away from them.

They went back to the revellers, who were thinning, and the majority of whom had not missed them much, owing to their eagerness for the good things which Farmer Hewitt had provided.

The gentlefolk were going. They were in time to meet Mr. Gifford and his sister crossing the paved yard towards the high road.

"Going?" said Hewitt. "Well, thanks for all your patronage. It does the poor good to see that the rich are interested in them."

"You have been poor yourself, Mr. Hewitt, perhaps?" said Mr. Gifford.

"What makes you think that?" asked the farmer sharply.

"You speak as if your sympathy with them were great, and I have generally observed that those feel most acutely for the poor who have been at one time or another closer to them."

"You pay me a high compliment," said Mr. Hewitt, half ironically, and despite the warning pressure of his daughter's hands.

"It is no disgrace to have been poor, at any time," said the rector's sister, breaking in here with her usual alacrity; "that is what my brother is going to say next."

"Yes, I am, dear, but you seldom allow me to finish what I am going to say, Augusta," he replied. "Miss Gifford speaks for me, Mr. Hewitt. Of course I intended to convey no reproach in speaking of a past estate less fortunate than this."

"In a worldly point of view," added Augusta.

"Certainly, my dear, certainly. Where are Laura and Mr. Essenden? Oh, Horace is with her, I see, at the door. What are they talking about, I wonder?"

"Waiting for Mrs. Martin and Paul, perhaps," suggested Augusta, and Nella turned and glanced

very anxiously towards those who lingered in the background. They came up the instant afterwards, and Nella looked into their faces intently as they nodded and passed on.

Mrs. Martin and Paul came last, the gentlewoman leaning on the arm of the elder nephew, and the ne'er-do-weel—an odd-looking being, in his great slouch hat, in contrast to the gentlemen who had preceded him.

"Well, Miss Nella," Paul said, "this has been a trying day for you, and you are glad enough that it is nearly over, I am sure. What a miserable night it has been!"

"Miserable," echoed they all.

"Everybody's been everywhere but in the right place," he answered tetchily and enigmatically.

"Meaning that we had better have stopped at home, Paul?" said Mrs. Martin.

"No. I don't mean that, aunt," said Paul, laughing, "that was not in my thoughts."

"What did you mean?" asked Mrs. Martin.

"Oh, that I meant to be infinitely more jolly, but somehow failed in my intentions. Good-night, George. Good-night, Miss Nella."

He shook hands with father and daughter, with the daughter last, who suddenly snatched her hand away from him, and took a long deep breath of

astonishment—perhaps of fear—but did not answer to his parting salutation, although he said good-night once more.

Nella was very thoughtful when they had gone away—very thoughtful till the last harvester who had the use of his limbs had walked homewards, till all the lights were out in the barn, and the key turned upon herself in her own room.

Then she knelt down at the bed's foot, and cried long and bitterly, amidst her fervent prayer that all might not be as she had begun to fear it was.

CHAPTER THE TWENTIETH.

THE FIRST SURPRISE.

ABOUT a week after Farmer Hewitt had gathered the corn into his barns, when harvesting was at an end in Deeneford, and the reapers and their satellites had tramped further north, the Reverend Theobald Gifford received an invitation to preach a sermon in his old church at Wilton. The invitation was pressed upon him by the incumbent, who four years ago had changed places with him there. The sermon was to be preached on behalf of the schools, in which Mr. Gifford had always taken a great interest. They were going backwards in their funds, and it was thought that the appearance of Mr. Gifford in the pulpit, pleading for the cause which he had always had at heart, and showing still his interest in Wilton, and in the many who must perforce remember him, would have its weight with the congregation, and—for the money question must be seriously considered even in our churches—its due effect upon the receipts.

"What a distance to go, Theo," said Mrs. Gifford, on the morning the letter was received. "What an unconscionable request to make to you!"

"Yes, it is a long distance—a tedious journey by rail, with several changes of carriage," he answered, reading the letter for the second time; "but I think that I should like to be of assistance to Mr. Marston."

"And then the trouble of getting some one to preach here for you."

"Oh, Small will do all the duties for one Sunday: curates, poor fellows, are more severely taxed than that at times."

"Yes, but Small is not liked, dear—that is, his sermons are not liked much."

"Well, they are a little weak," said Mr. Gifford, hiding his complacency in his breakfast-cup; "but there is nothing surprising in Mr. Small taking my duties for one Sunday."

"How dull I shall be whilst you are away," said Laura, with a heavy sigh. "Three days at least you will be going and returning."

"You must ask Augusta to help you to keep house, Laura."

"Why, my dear Theo, you talk as if you had made up your mind to undertake this task."

"I should like to see Wilton," he said thoughtfully. "After all, it was a place I liked. There

are many associations connected with it that are pleasant to me, and I can do a little good in my humble way by going."

"Why don't Mr. Marston get a bishop to preach for him?"

"Well, my dear, I do not know," said Mr. Gifford, his grave countenance relaxing for an instant at the question. "Possibly a bishop is not handy to procure just now, and possibly he thinks that I may be of as much use as the bishop. You don't want me to leave you, Laura?"

"I—I would of course prefer your remaining at home," answered Laura, colouring somewhat. "I should miss you very much; I cannot see the use of your undertaking this long journey."

"We must be prepared to sacrifice our feelings, and our convenience, many times in our life's pilgrimage," said Mr. Gifford: "it is by abnegation of self that we rise above ourselves."

Mr. Gifford delivered this remark effectively, and it was perorations of this kind which generally confounded his young wife, and rendered her afraid of him. It was his pulpit-style put on at the breakfast-table, and there was no facing it with her commonplaces. And yet what abnegation of self was there in Mr. Gifford's determination to deliver a charity sermon at Wilton church? Mr. Gifford was anxious

to preach at Wilton, to see the old faces, to note the changes which had occurred since his departure, and the effect which his re-appearance would create ; and it would have been a disappointment to have said No to his friend's appeal for assistance. But still he regarded the question from the self-denial point of view, and thought inwardly what a good fellow he was to put himself so much out of the way to oblige an old college chum. So our poor humanity deceives itself, and even selfishness may look from one point of view extremely like self-sacrifice.

Laura Gifford gave in for that day, but returned to the attack the next, simply worrying her lord and husband, but failing to convince him. He was a man who always had his own way, and believed his own way to be right, we are aware ; and as there was no valid reason to urge against his going, as this was part of the duty of his honourable profession, and in his clerical duties he could not understand an interference, Laura found that her arguments and persuasions were wasted on the desert air, and that Mr. Marston's invitation was accepted by her husband.

He started for Wilton on the Friday morning, with a neat little portmanteau, which he could stow away under the seat of his carriage. His wife parted sorrowfully with him.

"I wish that you had asked me to accompany

you," were her last words—and they sounded almost like a reproach—before he stepped into the chaise which was waiting outside the porch to convey him as far as Kliston.

"The fatigue of the journey would have scarcely compensated you for seeing your friends. And there is baby, too."

"I should not have cared about seeing my friends, but I should have had you with me, and I don't like being left here. I—I never feel safe in this place," she added, with an intensity of feeling that caused the rector of Deeneford to open his eyes a little more.

"My dear Laura," he exclaimed, "I had no idea that you were as nervous as this. This is a weakness to which it is childish to give way—it is indeed. Besides, we have arranged that Augusta is to stay with you till my return, and Mr. Essenden will call of an evening to see Augusta, and I really think that you will not be very dull."

"Well, it can't be helped now, Theo," she said, with a sigh. "I am a timid woman, I suppose, and feel safer—much safer—with you than with anybody else. You will come back on Monday, that is a promise?"

"Yes, on Monday—to be sure. Are there any commands?"

"Not any."

"Your love to your mamma, of course?"

"Yes—my love to dear mamma."

"And to Doctor Rivers—you remember Doctor Rivers?"

"Shall you see him?" she asked.

"To be sure I shall. A very old friend of the family—my poor father's friend."

"Ah, yes—I had forgotten. Pray remember me to him, Theo."

He kissed his wife, bade her keep up her spirits till his return, and went away, looking back as long as the parsonage was in view, and waving his adieux to the childish figure watching him sadly on the threshold of his home. As he went away he thought it was pleasant to be loved like this, to be missed like this, and he rejoiced in the faithful partner whom he had secured, one who could not bear the pangs of parting with him, even for three days.

"What a blow it would be to her if I were to die," was his first thought. "What would she do—how would she get over it?" And then he felt thankful for the deep affection of which he was the object, and thought of nothing but his young wife till he reached Kliston Station, and had nodded his farewell to his groom.

He arrived at Wilton at six in the evening, and he walked from the railway station through the

town to his friend's house, and was secretly moved by the evidence of recognition from the townsfolk. As he walked along the High Street, he met with many to whom his face was familiar, though they were not familiar to him, and he encountered a few humble folk who bowed or curtsied to him, and a few more who stopped him with outstretched hands and expressed their satisfaction at seeing him again. After all, there was a secret restlessness in this man's nature, a discontent of which he knew not himself. He was a man hard to please and to satisfy, and with the world about him he was not at his ease, for all the happiness that he thought had fallen to his share in it. As he went along the busy streets of the great town, he thought with a half-sigh of regret that it was a pity he had ever left Wilton. Here he had had crowds of human-kind to address, and hundreds who had valued his ministrings—here was a great field for his labours and his zeal, and he had given it up for a small living in Devonshire, and that for a smaller one in Deeneford. He had quietly submerged himself when he could have worked wonders in Wilton, and he could scarcely understand now why he had left the place, and let his ambitions, perhaps his chances of higher dignities, pass away completely from him. Yes, certainly a dissatisfied man at heart was Theobald Gifford.

Before he reached his friend's house—that house which had been his own once, and wherein his first wife had loved him and left him—he called on Doctor Rivers, who, the reader may remember, had lived within a stone's throw of him.

This Doctor Rivers was a friend of the family, we are aware—scarcely the friend of Mr. Gifford, who saw in him much worldliness and irreverence, albeit his heartiness and good temper were not to be resisted. Doctor Rivers had been, in fact, too familiar, too little impressed by Theobald's teaching, for the clergyman to esteem him highly, but the sentiment of this man's knowledge of the father and mother in old times, of this man's interest in and even love for them all, seemed to render it imperative that he should visit him.

Doctor Rivers was very glad to shake him by the hand again. They had corresponded once or twice since Mr. Gifford had left Wilton, but had not met each other since. The meeting was a welcome one on both sides, for Theobald could see how glad both the physician and his wife were to receive him as a guest there.

Knowing them so well, he was still scarcely prepared for the warmth of his reception. It embarrassed him, it interfered with his projects for the evening, and he wished already that he had made a

morning call instead, and had not been in so great a hurry to get that one particular visit over. He was not allowed to leave without dining with his friends, and when he pleaded the anxiety of Mr. Marston at his non-appearance, he was met with the intelligence that the reverend gentleman had been already sent for.

"You are not going away like this, Theo?" said the physician. "After four years' absence, to pay an old friend a flying visit of ceremony would be the height of unfairness. I wish that you had brought Augusta with you—what a dear girl she is—how I should have liked to see her! The same as ever, I hope?"

"Yes, the same as ever. One of the best of girls," replied Theobald.

"Do you know, Theo, what Mrs. Rivers and I were thinking about four years ago?" he asked.

Mr. Gifford did not know, and looked at the doctor inquiringly.

"We had made up our minds when you had found a second wife to your liking—and of course we were sure enough that you would marry, for all your protestations to the contrary," added Dr. Rivers, and his listener did not admire the remark, and thought it unseemly—"we had made up our minds, I say, to take Augusta off your hands, and constitute her as a

real daughter, whom we should have loved as our own, and cared for as our own. But when the news came from Devon of your marriage, we heard almost at the same time of her engagement, and that disarranged the whole conspiracy."

"It was very kind of you," said Mr. Gifford thoughtfully, "but I don't know whether I—whether she," he said, correcting himself, "could have been persuaded to accept your generous offer."

"Oh, we would have done her no harm," said the physician, reading very shrewdly the objections to the idea on Mr. Gifford's face, "and what a deal of good she would have done a rusty fusty couple like us, without any children of our own to love! Not that that has made us in any degree less happy, old lady," he said in a cheerful tone to his wife, and nipping in the bud a little sigh that had made an effort to escape him.

"No," answered Mrs. Rivers; "we have not quarrelled much in five-and-forty years, have we? I hope Augusta's may be as happy a marriage, Theo."

"I have not a doubt of it."

"You consider them suited for each other?"

"Exactly suited—for they love each other."

"Of course," said Mrs. Rivers; "and though the doctor and I used to have many an argument about

Mr. Essenden, though we objected to his boyish flirtations, and read him more than once a lecture on them, still, I have no doubt that he loves Augusta very much now."

Mr. Gifford did not quite understand this remark, and he was a man, to quote the old opinion of him delivered by Doctor Rivers in the second chapter of this history, who liked to know the whys and wherefores of everything.

"He always loved Augusta very much," said Mr. Gifford decisively.

"Yes; but he was not sure of his own mind."

"Quite sure of it; but his was a nature extremely reserved, and took time to speak out."

"Why, wasn't he terribly in love with——" And then Mrs. Rivers paused, for her lord and husband was telegraphing vigorously behind the clergyman's back, and for the first time it crossed her mind that she was making a mess of it.

"'Terribly in love with,' you were saying," prompted Mr. Gifford.

"Did I say that?" said Mrs. Rivers, confused between the decisive manner of Theobald and the active movements of her husband. "Well, not terribly, of course, for he was young, and she was scarcely more than a girl, and we know well enough that she didn't know her own mind then——Why,

you know that better than any of us, Theo," she added, with a dash through the difficulties of her position, as she thought.

But Mr. Gifford still sat on the sofa, upright and rigid, with not a muscle of his face relaxing, and Doctor Rivers stood behind him very red and nervous, and finally executed some little jumps in the air to the increased amazement of his wife, whose last impression was that he had gone completely out of his mind.

She was still watching the doctor furtively, when Mr. Gifford's cold, hard tones of voice brought her round once more to the subject.

"I should know better than any of you about what, Mrs. Rivers?" he asked.

"Why, of course, she has told you, Theo," said Mrs. Rivers. "You knew before you left Wilton that she——"

"Who is 'she?'" he interrupted.

"Why, Laura, to be sure."

"My dear Theo," cried the doctor, taking the lead in the conversation, to the great relief of his wife, "we fancied once that Horace was, as a boy, somewhat smitten with pretty Laura Masdale, as a girl. It might have been fancy on our parts—a silly idea, that we had picked up somewhere and somehow. They were girl and boy together, you know, but

I dare say it was only our foolish fancies, after all, now."

"No doubt. Mr. Horace Essenden has been attached for years to Augusta," said Mr. Gifford coolly; "and the supposition of Laura having thought for an instant, even as a school-girl, either seriously or romantically, of Horace, is one of the most ridiculous ideas that could possibly have entered your heads. I cannot imagine for an instant how it got there."

"Well, it's so long ago I can hardly tell you," answered the doctor, breathing somewhat freer till faced with the next question.

"Hardly tell me? Then you can tell me the origin of this by a little effort of your memory?"

"Mrs. Rivers might have heard it from the cook, or got it from the milkman," he answered lightly, however; and as Doctor Rivers was going in for his old weak jokes, Mr. Gifford thought it politic to be silent for the present. When his friend had arrived to welcome him, both the doctor and his wife considered that the unlucky subject on which they had entrenched was at last happily concluded, and the four sat down to dinner full of fresh topics of conversation. But it was remarked by the physician, who, in his way, was an observer of men, that Mr. Gifford was not quite himself for the remainder of

his stay. Theo had a word to say on every subject that came uppermost; he partook of most of the courses that were set before him; but there was a new look upon his face very difficult to guess at. He appeared to be thinking of something else when discussing Wilton politics or Wilton poor, and when he was not talking, and his host paid him the compliment of believing that he was listening with profound interest, he was staring over the head of the speaker at a mark on the wall behind him, full of the one thought which had arisen to his mind, born of Mrs. Rivers' carelessness. It was almost a stern face at which the physician glanced, and he thought it fortunate for himself that Mr. Marston was very attentive to his friend, and did not give Mr. Gifford much chance of conversing with the lady whom he had taken in to dinner.

When dessert was on the table, he did not think it quite so fortunate, for the incumbent of Wilton suddenly fixed him with a long anecdote, and his wife was left to the sole attentions of Mr. Gifford, who, he was sure, had the matter on his mind, and was not satisfied. The physician guessed the whole story pretty clearly now, and believed that Theo Gifford had not been told anything concerning the old flirtation between Horace Essenden and Laura Masdale—a flirtation which, for reasons to be

hereafter explained, he had known a great deal concerning.

Mrs. Rivers, an easy-tempered, dull-witted old lady, considered that the past dilemma had been comfortably surmounted, and was in the full career of a long anecdote herself, connected with parochial matters, when Mr. Gifford said quietly—

“I was not aware that you were particularly intimate with the Masdales before I left Wilton, Mrs. Rivers.”

“Neither were we, but Mrs. Masdale’s sister used to visit us frequently, before she went abroad with her husband.”

“Ah, to be sure, Laura had a letter from her only a few days ago. I suppose you got the idea from the aunt, who was a very strange woman?”

“What idea?” asked Mrs. Rivers innocently.

“The idea of Laura and Mr. Essenden having been attached to one another.”

“Well, perhaps so. She always knew more of Laura’s ways than the mother did. Laura confided in her more.”

“Laura would have had no secrets from her mother, I am sure.”

“N—no, perhaps not,” and then Mrs. Rivers tried to catch her husband’s eye, and receive a hint to retire to the drawing-room. This was effectually

done at all events, and she rose, and Mr. Gifford rose also and opened the dining-room door for her, and, to the amazement of Doctor Rivers, went out after her.

"Here—hi—Theo," he called out in his astonishment, and Mr. Gifford came a step or two back and looked into the room again.

"You are not going away like that; that will not do, that is not fair."

"If you will excuse me," said Theobald coolly; "you know my habits—that I never take wine after dinner, and always join the ladies when I can."

After this explanation he shut himself out, and left Mr. Marston and Doctor Rivers to themselves.

"What an odd fellow he is," said Rivers.

"What a good man he is," added Mr. Marston.

"Yes, I don't know a better, but I wish he was not so odd. It is difficult to know how to take him at times," remarked the physician.

When they went into the drawing-room shortly afterwards, they found Mr. Gifford standing by the mantelpiece with his hands behind him, looking down with his old undecipherable expression at Mrs. Rivers, who was sitting on the sofa, and responding to his questions, which ceased upon their entrance.

"I think that I will retire now, with your good leave," Theo said, after his first cup of tea.

"Why, it is not eight yet."

"It is not late—but I have travelled a great many miles to-day."

"And are doubtless fatigued with your journey," said Mr. Marston, rising also.

"No, I am not fatigued," he answered, for it would have been an untruth to assent to that, and the last excuse was a prevarication of which he was already ashamed, "but I hope that will not let me take you away, Mr. Marston."

"What—allow you to proceed to my house unaccompanied!"

"I am not going direct to your place," Theobald answered; "I think of finishing all my visiting at once, leaving the morrow clear for you and my sermon."

"Very well," said Mr. Marston, reseating himself, "then I'll trouble you for another cup of tea, Mrs. Rivers. What time may I expect you home, Gifford?"

He was a man fond of his tea, and one who disliked being hurried away from his comforts.

"I shall be home in about an hour, I think."

Then he took his leave, and Doctor Rivers went as far as the front door with him, persuading him to

prolong his stay, even after he had pulled his hat over his high forehead.

"I must go, thank you," said Mr. Gifford very coldly in return for all this warm pressure.

"Whom on earth have you got to call upon to-night?" asked the doctor.

"I think of paying Mrs. Masdale a visit."

"Oh—indeed."

Doctor Rivers appeared a little discomfited, and hazarded no more entreaties for his friend to remain. Mr. Gifford departed, and the physician returned to his wife and the Reverend Mr. Marston.

An hour afterwards the clergyman followed in Mr. Gifford's steps, and Doctor Rivers turned upon his better half immediately the door was closed upon the last guest.

"Upon my honour, Caroline, you *have* done it."

"Done what, dear?"

"Done no end of mischief—or at least disturbed not a little the mind of poor Theo."

"About Horace and Laura, and that flirtation between them?"

"Yes, to be sure."

"I think, by his manner, he knew all about it after all," said Mrs. Rivers; "for when he came into the drawing-room with me, he did not speak as if he doubted it."

"No; that was his artfulness to draw you out," said the doctor. "But he was always excessively searching, like cyanic acid, my dear. He has been brooding all dinner-time upon his wife, and it is my idea that he has never known anything of that sly courtship."

"Don't you think so?"

"She would have surely told him too," said the doctor, wavering again; "and yet she was always inclined to keep it a secret."

"Mr. Gifford remembered that you were called in by the Masdales when Laura was very ill, five years ago."

"Did he?"

"Yes; and he asked me what you were called in for."

"Well, and what did you say?"

"Why, the truth. I told him that there had been a quarrel between mother and daughter about Horace."

"And that the daughter had taken to hysteria and fainting fits, and so forth? whew!" he whistled; "it might have been as well if Mr. Marston had not asked old Theo to preach a sermon for him!"

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIRST.

A TROUBLED MIND.

WHEN Mr. Marston reached home he found that his friend had already returned, and was sitting in an arm-chair by the empty fire-grate, with his legs crossed, and his clasped hands round the knee that was foremost. It struck him that Mr. Gifford was very pale, and he said, on entering—

“My dear Gifford, are you not well?”

“I am very well, thank you,” was the reply, given somewhat curtly and hoarsely; and then Mr. Gifford looked over his friend’s head, as he had done at Doctor Rivers’ dinner-table.

“I fancy that you are beginning to feel the fatigue of travelling,” suggested Mr. Marston.

“My head aches, certainly,” replied Gifford, “and that is a disorder to which I am not often subject.”

“You found your mother-in-law well?”

“Quite well.”

Mr. Marston ceased questioning his brother clergy-

man, and was glad when Mr. Gifford expressed a wish for his chamber candlestick. Mr. Gifford was not pleasant company that evening, and he was not sorry to see the back of him, having hope in the next morning, after a good night's rest, for his friend.

A good night's rest ! He should have seen him in his room an hour afterwards, pacing slowly to and fro, as though he were measuring off lengths of the carpet, and it required careful study and incessant going over the same ground before he could be convinced of the accuracy of his calculations. Mr. Gifford walked to and fro with his head very much bent, and his hands clasped behind him ; and it was a face of great sorrow and anguish, that his every-day friends were never to see, and that probably was never to be seen even by those nearest and dearest to him.

We are aware that Theobald Gifford was not a hero ; that there were several defects which marred his character ; that he was naturally crotchety, anxious to sift to the bottom of all intricacies, and when his suspicions were once aroused, disposed to be vigilant and even over-suspicious afterwards. It was only his wife whom he had never disturbed by his little peculiarities, and in whom he had had implicit trust, and that day he had learned for the

first time that she had been once engaged to Horace Essenden. Engaged on the sly, and in opposition to her parents; a fact that was known to twenty people in Wilton, but of which he had never heard till that day.

Why keep this a secret from him? he reflected. Why, in these latter days, when there should be illimitable confidence between him and Laura—even between Horace Essenden and him—was he not to know anything of this? Why had not Laura frankly told him of her past engagement when he had asked her to be his wife down in Devon? He would have thought nothing of it then, and after laughing with her at her school-girl's romance, would have dismissed it from his thoughts. Perhaps she had forgotten to tell him—he stopped in his march to consider this new light upon the subject, and to breathe more freely in consequence—or had treated the matter always so far beneath his consideration as to set it for ever aside, as a something of which she was ashamed to speak. But then there rose to his mind sundry little dialogues which his wife and he had had concerning Horace Essenden, and he was astonished at his own retentive memory, and of the many cruel reminiscences which it conjured up before him. He could look back upon Laura's astonishment, almost indignation, at Horace's pro-

posal to Augusta, and of the hundred reasons which she had found against the match; and much that had been incomprehensible to him in her manner seemed to be apparent enough in the new lurid light in which it stood.

No, no, he would think of that no longer; that was unworthy of himself and unjust to his wife. Heaven forgive him for all those cruel thoughts which he could not repress, which came in spite of him and rendered him miserable! He would think no longer of this story, and of Laura and Horace's silence concerning it; they had been to blame, but there was a reason for it which he should find readily explainable, and there was an end to it, at all events. He had not been treated with confidence, and that was a grave offence which he could not quickly forgive, but he supposed that Laura had her reasons for silence, and beyond that there was nothing to complain about—nothing to suspect.

True, Laura had been eccentric, but it was possible that even that little secret had preyed upon her mind and kept her from feeling wholly happy. When he was at home, he would reprove her for her want of trust in him, and then forgive her. He would tell Horace that he had not treated his sister and himself fairly, and forgive him too. It was a miserable little grievance to have upset him like this,

and he should have been more of a man, and resisted it. His wife at least loved him very dearly; how sorry she had been to part with him that morning!

He had arrived at this conclusion when his friend knocked on the panels of his door without.

"Is it all right, Gifford? are you well?" called the voice of Mr. Marston through the keyhole.

Theobald stopped in his perambulations, and then replied—

"I am very well indeed, but I can't sleep?"

"Shall I get you anything—a little brandy——?"

"No, thank you," said Gifford, interrupting him.

"I am going to bed now. Good-night."

"Good-night."

The next morning Mr. Gifford made his appearance at the bachelor breakfast of Mr. Marston at eight o'clock precisely. He had been told that that was the usual hour for his friend's first meal, and he was in his place to the minute, cool and self-possessed. To Mr. Marston's inquiry he replied that he felt perfectly well—had, in fact, never felt better in his life; and, as he was altogether a different being from what he had been last night, the incumbent of Wilton was disposed to believe him. All that day Mr. Gifford was himself again, and he wrote his sermon in the evening, and congratulated himself

upon it being a powerful discourse. He preached it on the Sunday with his wonted energy, and found that his opinion of it was correct: the ladies shed tears, the gentlemen were full of interest, and the collection, the churchwardens said afterwards in the vestry, as they rubbed their hands softly together in their exultation, exceeded by ten pounds, seven and sixpence, the most sanguine anticipations.

"Theo did not appear to have Miss Masdale's first flirtation on his mind this morning," Doctor Rivers said to his wife on his return home. "I am glad of that, for I have always fancied him too much like his father—a fidgety fellow, who would fret himself to death almost if anything went wrong."

Doctor Rivers was right. Mr. Gifford did not appear to be troubled any further by his thoughts; he had mastered the position, and consoled himself with the true facts of the case. He went to church three times that day, and if he even wondered in his heart what Laura was doing without him, his immovable visage did not show it. He was too stern and proud a man to set himself up long for an object of people's attention, the physician might have remembered; but Doctor Rivers was satisfied with the general deportment of Theo, and shortly afterwards dismissed the whole matter from his mind.

When Mr. Gifford was going to his room that Sunday night, he held out his hand to Mr. Marston.

"I will wish you good-bye now," he said.

"Good-bye!" exclaimed his surprised friend.

"I shall leave by the five forty-five train in the morning, and I cannot think of rousing you at that time with my adieux."

"But, my dear Gifford, where is the haste? I thought you said that you would not leave here till the twelve o'clock express?"

"I have altered my mind. I am anxious to get home."

"But you wrote——"

"Yes, I know I did; but I shall be forgiven for returning a few hours before the appointed time, I hope."

His friend attempted a few more arguments in favour of delay, but he might as well have attempted to move his house by argument, as to influence, one way or another, Theo Gifford's mind. It was made up, and there was an end of it. He gave in, shook hands with him, and thanked him heartily for his services, volunteering to come down to Deeneford and preach a sermon whenever Mr. Gifford wished, an offer for which his friend thanked him somewhat drily in return. The next morning, before Mr. Marston had opened his eyes—although he had

fully determined to see his friend off by the first train—Mr. Gifford was steaming homewards, with his neat little portmanteau under his carriage-seat again. On various stages of his journey, he had the carriage to himself; and when he was alone he looked a little sterner or more thoughtful, as though his own company was not to his taste, but he joined in conversation with those travellers whom he met, and was altogether commonplace and amiable.

He reached Kliston at half-past three in the afternoon, and ordered a post-chaise at the hotel, where he stayed for a little refreshment before beginning the last portion of his journey. Money was not a consideration with Mr. Gifford, and, as he had told Mr. Marston, he was very anxious to reach home. More anxious than he cared to own, even to himself, for he was perplexed yet, and he longed for the clear, full explanation which should follow his first words.

Before his door he defrayed the expenses of the journey, added thereto his "pour-boire," and then knocked steadily at his front door and was admitted. He gave a good-day to his servant, and asked where Mrs. Gifford was. She was in the garden with Miss Gifford and Mr. Essenden. Ah, he remembered that Augusta was staying with his wife, and that it

was natural that Horace Essenden should call there ; that would do, his return home need not be announced in any way.

He went through the drawing-room towards the windows which opened on the garden, as he had done in Mrs. Martin's house a little while ago. He paused again in the shadow of the curtains, looking out once more as if it was always his habit to stop short at the last moment, and there he remained motionless and watchful, but with a very different expression on his face to that which we have noted on the day he called at the Hall for Mrs. Gifford. It was for an instant a fierce, distorted face too, for his wife and Horace Essenden were together walking backwards and forwards across the lawn, talking very earnestly, and his sister Augusta was nowhere to be seen.

"If I thought that now, I should kill him, perhaps," he muttered between his set teeth, and the impatient stamp which he gave to the floor was a sign of much hidden fire in the nature of this self-repressive man. Then his sister, Augusta, came from a side path with flowers in her hand, and went across the lawn towards them laughing musically, and that laugh took a load from his heart at once.

"I don't think I am quite in my right senses,"

he said, and then he stepped from the window and showed himself.

They were all glad to see him, if a little surprised. The women welcomed him with kisses, Horace Essenden with a hearty grip of the hand, and he felt that he was in real life again, and that all had been morbid dreaming during his stay at Wilton. He wondered how he could have had all those horrible thoughts with which he had been beset, and he believed now how easy it would be to clear up the past mystery of want of confidence in him. Want of confidence in him, of all the men in the world too !

"Here have I been cutting your best flowers by way of welcome to you at the dinner-table," said Augusta, "and risking a scolding for beheading the favourites."

"You are earlier than you said, Theo, I think," said his wife, "but you are all the more welcome for that."

"Thank you," he answered, and the thanks came from the bottom of his heart, where the heavy weight had lain.

After a few words had been interchanged between them, he went to his room to prepare for dinner, and finally to the nursery to see his child, where Mrs.

Gifford followed him to learn the news. Here was an opportunity to get over the explanation, but he deferred it—it was really a trifle of no consequence, and although he should be grave enough in his reproof, he was already prepared to forgive her when she had expressed herself sorry, very sorry, for her reticence. At a later hour, he would mention that little matter which distance had magnified out of its natural proportions—not now, for Horace and Augusta to puzzle themselves all dinner-time concerning the red eyes of his wife, and the grave demeanour possibly of himself. Presently would come a more fitting opportunity, and so presently let it be.

The fitting opportunity came at length, after Horace had escorted Miss Gifford home, and the rector had thought, twenty times that evening, how attentive Horace had been to his sister, and what an affectionate couple they were. He should not be greatly surprised to hear that it was a mistake—that Doctor Rivers and Mrs. Masdale were both in error together; and then all that he had extorted from that latter person rose before him, and rendered him less sanguine.

Husband and wife were sitting in the drawing-room where we have been a listener before; the

servants had locked up for the night and gone to their rooms, and the time had come at last for explanation.

“Laura,” he said suddenly, and with a seriousness that rendered her attentive at once, “I wish to tell you all that I have heard concerning you at Wilton.”

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SECOND.

A LITTLE EXPLANATION.

"LAURA, I wish to tell you all that I have heard concerning you at Wilton."

The young wife looked up suddenly, scared more by the tone of the voice than by the words; and then, unable to bear the steady light of those deep grey eyes bent on her, she looked away from him again.

"Concerning me?" she murmured.

"Yes, it has been a great trouble all the time that I have been absent. It has interfered with every pleasurable anticipation that I had had in going to Wilton; it has rendered the last three days the most miserable that I have spent, for they have been days of doubt and anxiety."

She clasped her hands and wrung them silently together. She felt that she could not meet his gaze; she must sit out the conference, and pray that he might not be too angry with her. She had feared

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his going to Wilton—it was the first time since his marriage—and she had seen this result cropping forth in one direction or another, to give the lie to all that she had told him. Here would arise the first suspicions in his mind, begetting others, and leading on to further complications. She could imagine, sitting there, that from that time forth every hope of happiness would sink away from her, leaving her that hard, suspicious man for gaoler. He would discover everything, and trust in her no longer, for she was certain that to deceive him once was never to be utterly forgiven. She believed in his love for her, and yet she was afraid of him, for the reason that she had striven to do her duty by him and failed—for the greater reason, perhaps, that she had failed in loving him too, and knew how immeasurably beneath his high standard of woman's perfectibility she was.

“I did not know, Laura, until Saturday last that you had ever been engaged to Mr. Essenden.”

“When I was very young,” she answered quickly, “when that engagement was a great folly on both sides.”

“Ye—es,” he said hesitatingly, “that is the light in which I see it, for you would not have married me if one grain of your girl's love for Horace had lingered in your heart. He was not in your thoughts

when I asked you to be my wife, and you said Yes to me?"

He put the question to her anxiously, with his whole soul on his thin lips and in his eager eyes. It was this which had troubled him for the last three days rather than that old love story; and to have answered Yes to it would have been to amaze him with the hypocrisy of women. And yet he yearned for the truth, the whole truth, and would have preferred it, however humiliating to his pride and confidence, rather than that she should disguise from him one iota of the facts. Laura glanced at him timidly once more, and only read there how he wished his question answered. A very timid woman, fearing how one question would follow another, until, in the maze of his severe persistency, the whole truth might escape her and condemn her. Feeling sure in her own heart that he would think unjustly of her if he knew all, and anxious always to make the best of everything, she said—

"No—he was not in my thoughts then, Theo."

She was glad that she had uttered that falsehood when she noted what a different and brighter expression followed it—glad that she had acted like a woman, and unlike a heroine. How could she have confessed to her husband, she thought, that she was in love with another man when she accepted him?

That would not have been natural in a wife, or true to poor humanity.

"I am very pleased to hear you say that," he answered, "although I could anticipate no other answer, knowing you so well."

She looked up for an instant almost fearfully, lest this should be the biting irony of one who knew more concerning her than he had told her yet; and then the earnestness of his tones, the brightness of his looks, assured her that there was no covert meaning in his answer.

"Knowing you so well," he repeated, "as a gentle, timid, trustful woman, who would not have so insulted me as to have married me for the little money which I had, or the moderate position you secured. For you were free to marry Mr. Essenden. Had you loved him you would have waited for him, and have found a younger and a richer husband after all. There was nothing in the way of that result except your love for me, Laura?"

"I knew that you would make me a good husband, Theo," she replied.

"And had forgotten—completely forgotten—that old love story of yours?"

"Yes," she replied. She had said this before, and it was necessary to keep up the delusion. All would end happily now between them, and on the other

hand all would have been distrust and bitterness. She would have preferred him changing the subject, in lieu of repeating that question, twisting it artfully round to another shape, that he might be the more completely convinced of her affection.

"Well, then, loving me, and having confidence enough to commit your future life to my care, I can hardly understand why you could not trust me with the history of your girl's romance. If it were past, lived out, what was there to fear in me—me, who had been more successful than my rival?"

"I wished to tell you, Theo, but my mother desired me not—thought that there was no occasion for it after our engagement."

"Poor woman. Why not?"

"She knew that you were proud; she thought that you were exacting, and she was very, very anxious that I should marry you."

There was the clue to all the mystery in those last few words of Laura Gifford's, but he did not seize it. It was the mother who had been anxious, not the daughter—only the daughter weak and vacillating, driven onwards by her own vanity, and her mother's worldly promptings.

"After our marriage—in the early days—you might have told me, although you had considered it right to study the mother instead of me before you

took my name. But afterwards, till this day, leaving me to find out by accident that which it was not likely could be kept back for ever, and to discover that you had not faith enough in me to relate so poor a story—it was not like a wife,” he said.

“Theo, you will forgive me that,” she replied. “I was afraid of making you unhappy—of meeting your reproaches for not telling you before our marriage all that you had a right to know. I was very young and timid, and you were my senior, and looked at everything so seriously, that I had not the courage.”

“Strange,” he muttered, “for what amount of courage did it require to tell me a simple truth? Though I forgive this reserve, Laura—which has shown a want of faith that has grievously humiliated me—still, it seems to have set us more apart, and it will only be by my own strong will and our own strong love that we bridge over the difference which lies between your thoughts and mine. For I cannot bear to be deceived in any way,” he said, suddenly becoming grave and stern again. “It is an offence to me, however trivial an error in the estimation of the one who deceives. I would rather die and hear the worst, than have that worst kept from me for fear that I was not to be trusted. I could for-

give everything but the treachery of an unwarrantable silence."

Could he forgive the worst part of that love story, or ever believe in her again? she thought, as she cowered from the light in his eyes. Dare she fling herself at his feet, and avow all? Had he looked less stern, had he not looked so strange and wild, as though there was a depth of passion in him which only a great wrong could fathom, she might have torn the veil from her shabby secret, and braved the revelation; but his manner only took her back further into herself, and there was the one hope that over the rest of her romance hung for ever the darkness which no suspicions could pierce. Sufficient for that day was the evil thereof; let her not attempt the dangerous experiment of confessing that she had never loved that man. He would be miserable for ever, she knew—for he was intensely proud, and had loved her too well—and she felt that she could make him happy without an acknowledgment so pitiable to both of them.

She was right in her judgment, she thought. Every word that followed seemed to convince her of the truth of that.

"I don't think that I shall be ever able to like Horace again," Mr. Gifford said, with his brow still contracted, "for he has professed to love Augusta all

his life, and that profession may be, like his life, a lie. What does he fear in my sister, that he cannot relate the story, and leave her to judge for herself whether he is worthy of her, after it? Does he wish to wring her heart as acutely as mine has been wrung, by leaving it for commonplace acquaintances to tell her what those who should have most confided in her have kept scrupulously hidden? You have not told him, Laura, to keep this a secret, surely?"

"No—oh, don't think that," she answered. "But—but he may have guessed from my manner, or from yours, that I had thought it best to say nothing of the past, and therefore his own ideas of discretion may have kept him silent."

"There it is," said Mr. Gifford with excitement, starting to his feet to walk up and down the room at a great pace—"there is the fact of one mistake leading on to another, till we are all involved in the meshes of duplicity. I myself," he cried, "have not been so open and generous as I should have been, for I was eager to find out the truth, and have met cunning with cunning, and have done everything but utter direct falsehoods. I led your mother to believe that you had told me everything, and then with no further motive for concealment, I learned from her all the particulars of this silly love affair.

To think that I have stooped so low to discover that which there was no necessity to conceal."

"Theo," she murmured, "do not reproach me again. You have said that all is forgiven between us."

"Yes, all is forgiven," he said; "I am thinking of Horace now—a man who should have had more pride than to have been ashamed of the truth; a man whom I am to look upon as a brother, and yet is as weak and foolish as a woman: whom, heaven forgive me, I must always despise."

"But if he has been only silent for my sake?" urged Laura very nervously.

"He has no right to think of you before his own honour," cried Mr. Gifford, with so much warmth, that his wife attempted no further defence of that gentleman. "What right has he to suppose for an instant that you have studiously kept back one fact from me which it was my right to know? He insults you, Laura, by that thought, however correct he may be in his suspicions."

"Pray let us say no more about it," urged Laura, "or I shall think that you bear me ill-will yet, Theo, for my weakness."

"Your weakness, not your want of faith in me, thank heaven!" said Mr. Gifford. "Well, we will say no more about it, and we will try to think

no more about it. You must understand that the fact itself is not of much consequence—not worth half the words that we have wasted over it; but the silence after the fact is very, very pitiable. I wonder whether Augusta has gone to bed ?”

“Why do you ask ?” inquired Laura quickly.

“I must tell her all that has occurred, of course, or insist upon Horace telling her. I think that I can console her better, for she will feel this as acutely as I, being in her way as proud, and as sensitive.”

“If she break off this match ?”

“I shall not be sorry,” said Mr. Gifford coolly. “I have been deceived in Horace, and I don’t think that I shall ever like him again. I will try to do so, if Augusta regard not this matter so seriously as myself; but it will take time to consider him as a true friend. If he hide so small a secret as this jealously and nervously, what may not be in the dark background of his thoughts ?”

Laura shivered. If he were suspicious thus of Horace Essenden—if his instincts, once directed to the right quarter, never swerved from that which was mean or false until they had unearthed it—might not she, in the future days, be hurled from him in his indignation? She did not feel so safe as she had done, and the days beyond were far from clear to her.

"I will not go to Augusta to-night," he said at last; "the news will keep, and it is not of great moment, if regarded in the right light. My disposition is more irritable than hers, and hence I have suffered more. I should not be greatly surprised to find her laugh at my seriousness, or feign to laugh, lest the wretched subject"—here again he stamped his foot—"should in her fancy be troubling me still. There, Laura, we will let it float from us, a weed upon the stream of time, which is flowing by us also, as we linger on the banks of life. There let it go, for what it is worth; we need not follow it with jealous eyes, knowing that it is better gone. But you must be stronger, for I need strength of mind in you as well as in myself; and it will not be incompatible with that womanly gentleness for which I loved you first, and will love you always."

As he stooped to kiss her, she put her arms round his neck and sobbed upon his shoulder, a penitent woman enough, but with a greater secret than he had ever guessed still locked in her heart, away from him—a secret that it was misery to keep and misery to divulge.

"There, there," he said soothingly, as he pressed her to his heart, "this is not the strength of mind I spoke of."

"Oh, Theo," she cried, "you know how weak I

am—how I have begged you more than once to make allowance for that weakness, which was born in me, and which has been fostered by ill teaching. I can never be strong.”

“Courage, my wife,” he said assuringly; “time will strengthen you.”

“No—no. I hardly know right from wrong. I see what a wicked woman I have been,” she said, trembling once more on the brink of her greater confession in that moment.

“I have made allowance for that weakness which could not trust in me,” he said; “it is all ended, and we are not likely to meet fresh troubles in our pilgrimage. I have been tempted by the Evil One to put to you many questions that would, in my turn, only show a want of confidence in *you*: but I set them aside once and for ever, knowing that you love me, and that there need not remain between us the shadow of one doubt.”

So the first quarrel ended between Theo Gifford and his wife, and the little “explanation” was at last terminated to the satisfaction of the stronger mind.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-THIRD.

AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE.

THE harvest feast was a fortnight old when Paul Essenden made up his mind to seize the first opportunity of proposing to Nella. He was a man under whose feet the grass grew not idly, when his mind was thoroughly resolved upon action, although action had often resulted in much that was profitless. He thought he saw his way ; he had no one to study, or at least there was no one whom he cared to study, and he felt assured that his happiness lay only in the direction in which he sought it at eight-and-twenty years of age.

He was very doubtful whether the prize at which he aimed would fall to his share, although the uncle, as he thought him still, was on his side, wishing him prosperity. He had a very poor opinion of himself, and knew that he did not deserve her yet ; but he wished for encouragement, to show that he was not the idle vagabond of past years, and that, with her love to strengthen him, he would prove

himself a hero. She was his first love. She was the first woman on whom he had ever bestowed a second thought; and coming late in life to a man who had always been a scoffer, this love was all the more serious for Paul.

He felt that he was precipitate in his resolution; but he had always acted promptly, if rashly, and even in his greatest hope he could afford himself no longer time. If she regarded him as a ne'er-do-weel still, why, it was better that he knew it; and if she could never love him—he should be able to tell that quickly by her manner, being a clear-sighted man, and not a fool—why, that knowledge would be the better for him also, and bring him down to his level. He scarcely expected her to say that she would accept him, but he had a chance of getting some hope back in return, and thereby seeing his way more clearly to his new life. For she seemed to understand him better than anybody else did; she was a shrewd, clear-sighted, clever girl, and if he had only been understood earlier in life, he thought, with a new and odd conceit, he would have been a different man.

He had appeared at church the last two Sundays, coolly walking into the pew where Nella was, in preference to joining his aunt and Horace Essenden, as though he defied his relations' suspicions, or

wished to announce to them both where his peculiar tastes lay ; but they simply set it down to his disregard for appearances, and his respect for the niece of one who had been kind to him in Australia. Horace had given his warning, half jestingly, to Paul a fortnight since, and Paul had answered it in his usual cool way, and betrayed no lover-like embarrassment ; therefore Paul, who did strange things, was not an object of suspicion.

But on the third Sunday, Nella, who was more embarrassed than the rest of them, said, quietly and gravely, when she met him at the churchyard-gates—

“ I wish that you would go into your aunt’s pew, Mr. Essenden.”

“ Why ? ” was the rejoinder.

“ Because I think your aunt expects you, and it looks singular to go anywhere else.”

“ I like to look singular,” he said in reply, “ and from a boy I have hated that stuffy old pew, turned sideways to everybody, and where there is no seeing anything when you sit down.”

“ Why, what do you want to see in church ? ”

“ Well, I want to see you, for one thing.”

Paul had not been bashful in his wooing ; he was naturally not a bashful man, and he spoke out on this occasion all that was in his mind. Nella could

only combat this manner by a method of her own, and it was this manner which led her to doubt whether there was really any depth of sentiment towards her in the heart of Mr. Paul Essenden, although she had been distracted by a few conflicting thoughts since the night of the harvest feast.

"To see me!" she said very seriously. "I don't like jesting at the church doors, Mr. Essenden."

"Quite right in your likes and dislikes, I have no doubt," replied Paul coolly, "but I am not jesting, upon my honour."

"You will go into your aunt's pew, please, this morning."

"That is really your wish."

"Certainly, it is."

"Then I'll certainly go," he replied; "though, if I fall asleep there and startle the congregation, it is entirely your fault, remember. But," he added, catching her by the sleeve as she was passing into church, "it is rather hard upon me, after coming to church to oblige you."

"To oblige me?" answered Nella in her surprise.

"Did you not say at the harvest feast that you wished I went to church? Well, here I am to oblige you—certainly not Mr. Gifford."

"If you talk in that irreverent way, you might as well have stayed at home," said Nella, indignantly,

and she always spoke indignantly when Mr. Gifford's name was brought in question.

"I beg your pardon, but it is the truth, for all that," he muttered, and then he followed her into church, taking his right hand out of his pocket for the convenience of holding the one respectable hat which he had been induced to wear on Sundays. He was certainly not a reverent man, although his manners were improving, and he had left off scoffing at things that were sacred to others, and out of respect, it appeared, for the feelings of others. He walked down the aisle, swinging his hat in his hand in a free and easy manner; and when Horace, already in his pew by his aunt's side, opened his "doll's eyes" to their fullest extent at his brother's appearance, he said, in a low tone—

"Well, stupid, what are you staring at? Just move your long legs and let me get by, will you?"

His aunt read his appearance there in a different fashion, and took all the credit of it to the smallest of hints she had dropped on the preceding Sunday evening. She rewarded Paul with a smile, and even pressed his hand gratefully as she handed him a large Prayer Book and hymn-book, and he felt for once very much like a hypocrite as he took his place by her side. He tried hard not to sleep that morning, and succeeded, but it was with a

great effort, as the voice of the curate was monotonous, and the cushions of the family pew unusually plethoric. He was more wakeful when Mr. Gifford preached his first sermon after his return from Wilton, for it was a sermon of considerable power, and less full of analysis than usual. A sermon that was not intended to be personal either, but which had been written to suit the mind of the composer, and which dealt forcibly with little sins, and showed plainly enough how, by fostering them, they grew to great ones. The sin of secretiveness, of want of confidence in those from whom no secrets should be hidden, the preacher inveighed against most, for his heart was full, and if he had forgiven everything, he had forgotten nothing, though it was far from his intention to be preaching at individual members of his congregation. He had felt deeply, and he had written his sermon powerfully in consequence ; he had become aware of the dangers of not speaking all the truth, and he feared that amongst his flock there were others besides Horace Essenden who withheld facts from the daylight, in the coward's fear for the result. It is just possible that in his secret heart he had had Horace Essenden in his mind more than anybody else, and had hoped that in pricking the conscience of others, Horace might be aroused to a sense of his duty. For he had

arrived at the conclusion that he would test Horace Essenden's character by leaving him to tell Augusta the truth. Horace and he had had already one painful interview on this subject, and the younger man knew at last what was expected of him, and felt grateful, like Laura Gifford, for all that had not been found out!

His brother Paul took the sermon entirely to himself, and thought that "that Gifford" was not a bad fellow after all. The minister advocated plain speaking and no objectionable secrets, and that was what he had advocated all his life himself, being at least a frank man, if not a strong-minded one: ergo, he would speak to Nella that very afternoon, and, with Mr. Gifford's words to back him, surely she could not object to his confession. And at all events, he thought, with an odd little sigh, that it would be over for better or for worse from that day.

He was at the farm at two o'clock, before Hewitt and Nella had quite finished their early dinner. He apologised for the intrusion, and then sat down in an arm-chair, and waited patiently, conscious that the farmer had noticed something in him that was different from his usual manner.

"We dine early, to allow of the wenches getting to afternoon service," said Mr. Hewitt; "and Eleanor keeps house till their return."

"Very kind of Miss Eleanor," said Paul, "for I am sure that she would rather go to church herself, Mr. Gifford being so great a favourite of hers."

This seemed an unseasonable remark, considering the motive which had impelled Paul Essenden to go to the Upland Farm that afternoon; but Mr. Gifford was quoted on all occasions to him, and appeared to get very much in his way. And after all, it was not intended as a severe comment on Nella's habits, but rather to strengthen his own case when he dashed "in medias res," as we shall see hereafter.

"I feel that I cannot go to church too often," said Nella quickly; "that I make up for lost time."

"Why, Paul will think that you never went to church before you came here," said Mr. Hewitt quickly.

"Oh, he knows better than that," answered Paul. And then the conversation was at an end until the dinner was concluded and Nella had withdrawn. As the door closed upon her, Hewitt said quickly—

"Why have you come so early, Paul? Do you mean it to-day?"

"Yes; I mean it, George!"

"Sunday, too," added Hewitt.

"Sunday is a lucky day with me; you saved me on that day, if you recollect."

Then the two men shook hands, and Hewitt said in a low voice—

“Success to your wooing, Paul; but I would not build too much upon it.”

“What, has she said anything?” was the eager question.

“No; she hasn’t said a word. But she has been very dull and thoughtful lately, and always changes the conversation when your name is mentioned.”

“Why, that’s a good sign.”

“You are hopeful, then?” asked Hewitt eagerly.

“I can’t say that I am exactly hopeful,” replied Paul; “there’s a great deal in the way of success. I’m a rough bear of a fellow, and she can’t like me much, but I don’t care to go on in this way any longer. Where is she now?”

“She will go into her room and read her Prayer Book, or, if the sun keeps out, into the home-close under the trees.”

“I hope the sun will keep out, then.”

And as if to give Paul Essenden every chance, the sun shone brightly, every cloud was wafted away from the sky, and Nella went to sit under the great elms where she had spoken with Mrs. Wisby a few weeks ago.

With all the good intentions with which she had left the farm that afternoon, Nella did not pay much

attention to the book in her hands. It was not the Prayer Book, as Mr. Hewitt had told Paul, but that little pocket Bible which Augusta Gifford had given her before she went away from Wilton ; but Prayer Books and Bibles were about the same kinds of things to George Hewitt. Here, under the elms, in the fine summer weather, would Nella steal to read her Bible—to gather by degrees that true knowledge of life here and hereafter for which she yearned now. A well-meaning and pious woman, not deeply read, not free from impulse, judging for herself too much, but strong in heart and mind, and seeing for herself, as she thought, poor Nella, the path ahead of her to its close—straight and narrow, and with but little sunshine on it till the end was reached, and there, with Heaven's mercy on the penitent, glowed the eternal light of heaven.

She tried to read that afternoon, but her mind went off into thoughts apart from the book, despite her efforts at attention. She was deep in thought when Paul Essenden came up and stood before her. It was not till he was looking down upon her that she became aware of him.

“Oh, Mr. Essenden,” she said, “I did not know that you were here.”

“I hope I have not frightened you.”

“No, not at all.”

"I should not have disturbed you in your reading, Miss Eleanor," he said, suddenly dropping to her side and regarding her very earnestly, "if I had not had something of importance to communicate. Mr. Gifford recommends us to speak out."

"No bad news?" asked Nella quickly.

"Very bad news, perhaps," said he; "it depends a great deal upon the light in which you—you of all women—regard it. It is very likely that I shall go home, pack up, and leave Deeneford."

"Not at once?"

"Yes, I think at once, Nella. There, don't look alarmed at my calling you by that name; it has escaped your uncle once or twice, and it is a name I like very much myself, and hence I take to it—being a rude, familiar fellow, as you know, ill-bred and unpolished. Yes, Nella, it will be going away at once unless——" A long pause here, and then he dashed forth impetuously, "you ask me to stay."

Nella trembled very much, crimsoned very deeply; she shrank away from him a little, and for an instant looked with almost horror at him.

He saw that look and movement, and took despair to his heart, although he went on manfully to the end with his confession. Lit up by an earnestness that was new to it, by an expression which his

excitement gave to it, his was a face that any woman might have loved. There was a nobleness of look, a tenderness of feeling there that was worth observing, and from which one might have augured a brighter future for Paul Essenden.

"Unless," he continued, speaking very rapidly, as though anxious to end all and be gone, "you ask me to stay for your sake, fearing that you should miss me too much. Ask me to stay because I love you, and because you see that in leaving you, Nella, I leave behind the one hope that I have ever had in life—that I have ever set my heart upon."

"Oh, why—why have you thought of me like this?" cried Nella, letting her Bible fall to the ground, and spreading her hands before her face. "Of all the world, to think of me?"

"Because you are a girl devoid of all affectation, simple-minded, honest, and true."

"Don't say any more—for mercy's sake don't say any more," almost shrieked Nella, as she shrank still further away from him. "I can never marry you; I—I can never love you back again."

"Yes, I know that now," said Paul, in a hoarse voice; "of course you can't, and I ought to have seen that for myself, and not have pained you thus. I see the immeasurable inferiority of my position, my nature, to your own, and no one knows better

than I what a moneyless vagabond I am. But, Nella, I only wanted one hope, one legitimate ambition to change all this, and I could have come back presently—oh, far more worthy of you.”

She was wringing her hands, and begging him to say no more; but he did not heed her in the earnestness of his apologies.

“For I haven’t been so bad a fellow as people think: my own enemy at times, that was all, but doing no one harm, I hope, and remembering always, in my wildest follies, that my poor father was a gentleman, and died believing that his son would be one also. They gave me about here the worst of characters, and, perhaps, you have heard——”

“Paul, don’t offer me these excuses,” she cried, finding her voice at last — “me of all women in the world, whom you would raise from the shadows that are round me. Go, find some one fitting for you, and leave me to my duties here.”

“But——”

“You know what I am; why pain me by this feigned humility because I will not have you for my husband?”

“Yes, I know what you are to me,” he answered with a groan.

“My uncle——”

“Is a man penitent for all the past, and

whom I respect—whom I am proud to call my friend ”

“Has he told you to come here—does he know with what motive ?”

“Yes.”

“Has he spoken to you of me—of my past life, too ?” she asked, looking almost fiercely into his face ; “you who can easily guess that I have never been a lady ?”

“I was to be told all if you loved me,” answered Paul.

“So that the love you had for me might be scared away completely—as it would have been, Paul, I pledge you my honour !”

She had never called him by his Christian name till that day, although he had wished it more than once ; but he took no hope from it. It was her method of offering him consolation—of softening the shock of her refusal of him.

“I pledge you my honour, no,” he answered very quickly.

“Oh, you do not know—you will never know, I hope !” she said sadly. “It is a cruel story, and I am glad that there is no necessity to speak of it—to ask your charity and sympathy. Perhaps I have already told you by these words, Paul,” she added nervously ; “and if, thinking of them afterwards,

you guess the truth, why, pity what I have been."

"What has the past to do with me?" he cried. "Tell me what it is, that I may show you how I value it against the love I have for you. Ah, if you had loved me, Nella, ever so little, you would have told me?"

"Yes, I might have done that at all risks," she added thoughtfully; "but I cannot love you, and there's an end of it. I am proud, Paul, to think that you could see anything in me worth your loving, although very, very sorry that it has come to this confession. I had begun to fear it—to pray against it latterly, though I had hoped by degrees to let you see that it could not end in any good, and thus have spared your feelings more. I had not expected you to act thus hastily."

"I am a hasty man—I think what is best for me, and leap towards it at once, caring not for others. This is only one more mistake."

"A disappointment, too, from which you will speedily recover," said Nella, rising, an action in which he followed her at once, "for in the sphere apart from mine you will meet the one more fitting for you."

"Pray do not try to console me with these commonplaces," said Paul, almost sternly. "What my

disappointment is, leave me to find out for myself, Nella. I am not a boy, to forget it, that is all. We will say no more about it."

She did not answer for a few minutes, but walked slowly and even unsteadily towards the farm, leaving her open Bible unthought of on the grass. Paul noticed her faltering steps, and asked her if she would take his arm, which she did, to his surprise almost.

"I am not strong, I have felt ill all the week," she explained, as if to assure him that it was not the excitement of that interview which had overpowered her.

"Before I go away," he said, "let me at least express my regret at having startled you by my precipitation."

"Is that satire, Paul?" she asked sorrowfully.

"No, a true regret. I am not often satirical," he replied; "but I am more sorry for your sake than you would care to hear. And, going away, let me echo your wish, too."

"What wish?" she said.

"That in your sphere, apart from mine—always apart from mine!—you will meet one more fitting for you."

"You promised me that you would say no more," she urged, turning away her head from him that

he should not see the fresh tears that had started to her eyes.

"I have felt bound to say as much as that."

"In my sphere I am not likely to marry or to meet the one that is fitting for me," said Nella; "and if there is any consolation in hearing that I shall never marry, why——"

"Why, don't tell it me," he said interrupting her; "for you are too young to make rash promises, and in listening to them I shall take no consolation. You have acted wisely, Nella; I cannot blame you—can only say, married or unmarried, Heaven bless every step of yours away from me."

She could not answer him again, but walked on silently by his side, seeing nothing for the mist before her—seeing not her father, who was close upon them, coming to meet them with his hands outstretched, and with a face of joy such as they had never gazed at yet.

"It is all settled, then—it is all explained? And you, Paul——"

"That will do," cried Paul quickly; "you are mistaken. Don't say any more, please, under these circumstances, but see to Nella, who is not well—whom I have dashed utterly down by my rudeness. Take care of her always, George, and don't quite forget me—either of you."

He passed her suddenly into the arms of her father, and then stood for an instant apart from them, looking at them both with a long, lingering gaze, which told all that was in his mind then.

“You are going away?” gasped Hewitt.

“Yes, for good—for the good of all of us. Don’t make a fuss. How much money is it that I owe you?”

The farmer shouted forth an oath at him for that irrelevant remark, and Paul went on—

“Never mind, I can find out for myself. Good-bye, both of you. May I, George—may I for only once in life—in all my long life, Nella?”

He advanced hastily, leaned forward, kissed the woman in her father’s arms, and then went swiftly away from the Upland Farm for ever.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FOURTH.

PAUL PACKS UP HIS BOX.

PAUL ESSENDEN walked home at a rapid pace, was admitted by the servant, and went straight up-stairs into his bedroom. The struggle was over with him, the excitement of his fleeting love-passage had subsided, and he was very grave and stern. His mind was made up to the one course that lay before him, and there was nothing left save action. Let him get out of the place, away from all those new associations which might have become home-ties, and could only be, after this, the bitterest of reminiscences. The sooner that he was gone, the better for himself and everybody else.

He would be gone at once—he would go that very day, that very afternoon, before people had time to talk about him in the village—to irritate him, perhaps, with their remarks, or by their detecting a difference in him which even he could not conceal.

He began packing away all his things into the

great seaman's chest, which had found its way, after much delay, into its owner's possession, and which, one or two friends thought, might remain there for good, if Paul were humoured a little, and not interfered with too much.

It was an odd kind of packing, not arranged on any system, any more than had been Paul's life; he took out each drawer of the chest in his room, turned it bottom uppermost over his open box, and discharged the contents like coals into the receptacle. He looked round the room to see that he had not forgotten anything, and flung in the few articles that were left about, and which belonged to him, remembering afterwards that he had packed his great slouch hat, and tossing the things wildly over in his search for it. He gave his one respectable holiday hat a kick into a corner of the room as a something that he had discarded for good—like his better self, mayhap—and then he pressed and trampled on his wardrobe until he was able to close the lid and turn the key in the lock. In a few minutes he had corded it securely—for he was handy with ropes, and had been to sea more than once—and then he sat down on his box, clasped his hands together, and thought for a few minutes, till his thoughts troubled him too much, and he was on his feet again with a bound.

"No, it will not do to sit still," he said. He lighted his short pipe, opened the window to allow a little of the smoke to escape, as though his sense of the "proprieties" lingered with him yet, and finally he went back to his box to inscribe his name thereon, and the booking-office in London at which it was to be delivered, and where it was to be left till called for.

"I suppose it may as well be in London as anywhere else, to begin with," he said thoughtfully; "that is an easy starting-point to any part of the world."

He was giving the last flourish to his address, when the door opened, and his brother Horace entered.

"Hollo, Paul," he exclaimed in his astonishment, "what on earth are you doing this Sunday afternoon? I thought that you had gone over to Hewitt's for the day, and could scarcely believe the servant when he told me that you were up here."

"Yes, here I am," said Paul quietly.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"Can't you see?"

"It is not going away, Paul, surely?"

"It looks very much like it, old boy," said Paul, smoking away very vigorously. "You know I always take these sudden freaks into my head, being

an erratic being, with no feelings of my own, and no respect for the feelings of others. I am tired of Deeneford, and—I am off.”

“When?”

“Oh, in about five minutes. I did not intend to distress—to trouble you I should have said—with my adieux. They only upset one unnecessarily, and lead to cross-questioning and whole heaps of silly explanations, which people are always better without.”

“And you would have gone away without saying good-bye to us?” said Horace half-reproachfully.

“Yes, it is my style,” was the answer. “You know I object to ceremony, and the ceremony of leave-taking is a nuisance to me. It would have been so much the better to have opened the door and sneaked out like the worthless cad I am.”

“Has any one offended you?” asked Horace; “has anything been said at which you have taken offence without a cause? You will tell me, Paul, I am sure.”

“My dear Horace, I have no complaint to make, for no one has offended me. Think that I am simply tired of this still life, and must be moving once more. Why, I never said that I should stop long.”

“I had a hope that you would,” said Horace moodily.

"For what reason?"

"To be of use to me, perhaps," was the answer, "for heaven knows I don't feel quite the man I should be. I have fancied lately, Paul, that I might want your help—that you might, after all, be the strong, earnest, good man of the family, and would stand my friend, and take my part when others fell away from me."

"Hollo, what has happened, then?" asked Paul.

"Oh, nothing much; but I see the danger signal ahead of me, and I rush on, and take no heed of it."

"Then there will be a smash presently, of course," said Paul drily. "Has the parson found you out?"

"Yes."

"What of it? It is an old story, and there is nothing in the present to grieve over, I suppose. A little surprise, a few reproaches from Miss Gifford, and then Horace is himself again."

"He will never be the old Horace again, Paul," said the weak man, shaking his head.

"Nonsense. You were always of a morbid turn, and looked at the worst of everything. Your life is bright enough, and you can only mar it by your own imprudence. There, don't begin complaining to me—don't worry me with your little maudlin sentiments, for I can't bear them to-day. I must

escape them, you, and everybody in this infernal place!" he added fiercely.

"And yet you tell me that nothing has happened," said Horace reproachfully.

"Well, something has happened," Paul burst forth with, "and I don't see why I should be ashamed to speak of it. Because I have asked a woman to marry me, and she has said No—because I loved that woman. What are you glaring at? You don't love her—you are not in love with every woman in the place, I suppose?"

"Of whom are you speaking?" asked Horace hoarsely.

"Of Hewitt's niece, to whom I proposed this afternoon."

"That—that girl?"

"What of that—that girl?" asked Paul, mocking his brother's tone of voice, and speaking angrily. "If you tell me that you have known a better or a purer one it's a lie, which I will not brook."

"You have asked Miss Hewitt to be your wife?"

"Yes, and she has refused me very properly; for I had no prospects, there was nothing in me to like, and my character was a bad one. You have wrenched the story from me, and much good may it do you; but why the deuce could not you have let me go away without saying anything about it?"

"I am very much surprised," said Horace slowly and thoughtfully.

"You were alarmed at this a few weeks ago," said Paul, "and dropped me a hint to that effect. But there, there; the Essendens have been saved from the disgrace of which your fine feelings were afraid. The end is reached, and it is all over."

"To think that you should have loved Miss Hewitt, Paul!" Horace said, and then, to the amazement of his brother, he spread his hands before his face and groaned.

"You don't love her?" said Paul, his face becoming very dark with jealousy; "that was a jest of mine when I asked you the question; but now I put it to you seriously."

"Love her—I don't like her at all," cried Horace wildly. "I see in her much affectation and hypocrisy; I don't believe in her goodness. I—I could hate her but for you!"

"Ah, you know nothing concerning her," said Paul, relieved in mind by this reply. "If you had seen her as often as I have you would esteem her as highly, love her as I do, and forget all the world beside. I am a bad man, but I was not likely to love anything but the best of women, Horace, and so I loved her, and lost her."

"It is a positive refusal, of course?"

"Yes; there was no hanging back; it was a plain, downright No, from which the ghost of a hope could never rise again. So I am going away to forget this, if I can."

"A little change will be beneficial to you," said Horace. "Now I know all the truth, I will not persuade you to stay."

"I could not draw a breath here," answered Paul.

"You are right to go away at once," he said nervously and almost eagerly; "I know what you must feel in the first bitterness of your disappointment."

"No, you don't," was the quick answer; "no one guesses what I feel—you and your set would not give me credit for it."

He knocked the ashes of his pipe out upon the window-sill, put the pipe in his pocket, and took up his slouch hat.

"You'll see this box off Londonwards in the course of to-morrow, old fellow," he said; "that is your commission. And now, good-bye, and good luck to you."

He extended his hand, and Horace shook it in his own.

"I'll come a little way with you," said Horace, "I will——"

"Please stay where you are," replied his brother ;
"my own company only agrees with me at present.
I want to walk swiftly and solitarily away from all
this."

Horace read that was his wish, and gave in.

"Very well," he said sadly.

"I don't think that I have anything else to say,"
Paul remarked, in a hesitating manner. "You know
all ; keep it all to yourself, for my sake. You will
hold aloof from these Hewitts, who are strange
people, whom you will never understand ; but if—if
anything should happen to bring trouble to them, if
you should hear of Hewitt or his niece being in any
way unhappy—and things as unlikely as that may
occur in life—you are my brother, and you must
represent me."

"Represent you ? In what way ?" asked the
wondering Horace.

"To do your best for them, and to stand by
them, just as if I were here in your place. It will
never occur, in all probability ; but say that trouble
comes one day—a strange trouble, difficult for you
to guess at—why, I rely on your doing the best for
them, for my sake, knowing that I loved the woman
very much. Now good-bye again." *

"Good-bye, Paul," said Horace.

The elder brother was at the door, when Horace

called him back, and then stood looking at him almost wildly.

“What is it?” Paul said at last.

“You will see our aunt before you go?” he stammered.

“No. My love to the old lady, and tell her that I had not the nerve; that I fancied she might be even distressed at my departure, and that it was better to save a scene by stealing quietly away from her. She will think so too, I have no doubt.”

He went along the corridor and down the stairs at a sharp pace; he put his brigand-like hat on his head, opened the hall door, and then went back a step in his dismay, for Mrs. Martin confronted him as though to balk his last intentions. She had stepped from her carriage, which had brought her from afternoon service at Deeneford church, at the same moment as he had opened the front door.

Whether his face told his story, or his hat betrayed him that Sunday afternoon, it was difficult to determine, but the grey-haired lady looked at him very wistfully, and said—

“What is the matter, Paul? Where are you going?”

He looked from her to the servant who had lowered the carriage steps, and then offered his arm to escort her into the drawing-room—an act of

deference that he had never shown in all his life before.

"I think you guess already, aunt," he said, as they went in together.

"Yes, I can guess, I think," she answered, with a sigh.

They went into the drawing-room together, and he closed the door, led her to her favourite seat in the arm-chair by the window, and then bowed over her and kissed the withered hand like a gentleman of the old school.

"Forgive me, aunt," he said, in a low tone, "but I am going away."

"Not for long, Paul, I hope," she answered gently.

"I will not say for good, though I think it may be so," he said, "and though I am sure all of you will get on much better without me. Here is no settling down, and therefore let me go away quietly—a fellow that no one will miss, and one who apologises very heartily for all the trouble he has been to you."

He would have escaped then, but she said quickly—

"Very well, Paul, very well; but let me understand your motives. Do not run away, and leave me perplexed with them for ever afterwards."

"Horace will relate the rest. Tell him for me

that I do not want to make a secret of my reasons for leaving this house. Between you and him my story, then."

"You two have quarrelled?"

"Heaven forbid that he and I should ever have an angry word together."

"What is it, then?"

"Ah, my dear old aunt," he said imploringly, "don't ask me to relate this foolish story, when he will tell you so much better, and spare your feelings so much more! Let our last parting be as friends, true to one another, and who are not devoid of that affection for one another which springs from the common blood in our veins. There, give me your blessing, as my mother would have given it to me, and let me go away."

"Heaven bless you, Paul!" she murmured; then she raised her face towards his, and he understood her, and stooped down and kissed her.

"I will not worry you," she continued. "Your brother shall tell me all, and I will think the best of you, whatever that story may be."

"Thank you," he said gratefully. "You will think, perhaps, that I acted for the best, and you will see presently that I am better apart from you. Good-bye, aunt; long years of health and happiness be with you still."

"Is there—is there any pecuniary assistance that I——"

"Oh, no," he said very quickly, "I am not hard up. I shall find work to do, and if I don't find it, why, I can write for help."

He was at the door, terribly anxious to terminate the interview, as though he knew all that was vibrating in the heart of the old lady, and would escape it, if he could. Another moment and he would have disappeared, when she stretched out her hands towards him, and said, with an agitated voice—

"Stay, Paul, and be my son, as Horace is, for the few years that I have to live. I don't like your going away like this—back to the past life which nearly broke my heart once."

He crossed to her once more, and said, very slowly and firmly—

"Never again the past life, aunt, I promise you. I am unhappy, but not reckless, and you may trust in me to keep my name clear. There, there, I will come back again some day perhaps. I will write to you presently—it's a promise ; but now I am very miserable, and must go."

He went away from her after kissing her again, and the instant afterwards the door closed behind him, and he had passed into his new life away from all who had a claim upon him.

BOOK III.—CAST BACK.

CHAPTER THE FIRST.

AT LAST.

AUGUSTA GIFFORD had recently become aware of a formidable rival in her district-visittings, if there can be formidable rivalry in doing good, and helping the unfortunate. She had been always first amongst the poor—first in generosity, having money to spare, and first in their affections, having kind words to give as well as money, and knowing when their power would be as efficacious. It is possible that Augusta was proud of her ministrings and of her influence, being sure that she was one of the best of women, or she could not have won so much upon the esteem of those whom she sought out in their tribulation. There had been a quiet pride in distancing her brother in their regards, and though she spared that brother's feelings and vaunted not of her suc-

cess, there was, nevertheless, a satisfaction in being the presiding genius amongst the Deeneford villagers, just as she had been once the woman looked up to, trusted in, and loved by all those denizens of back-slums in the great town of Wilton.

. It was a surprise to her—almost a vexatious surprise—when she discovered, before the autumn was far advanced, that there was one who had quietly taken the foremost place, who had been as liberal and judicious in her alms-giving, as gentle in her advice, and as unobtrusive in her patronage as she had, and this was the farmer's niece, who had suddenly taken an active part in village affairs, and was often to be found before her and her brother at the bed-side of all who needed help. Augusta Gifford would have been glad of assistance, that regular earnest assistance which was a contrast to her sister-in-law's spasmodic efforts to sustain the part of Lady Bountiful; but she was scarcely glad to find that Nella seemed better understood than she—that the people appeared, after a while, even to trust in her more. It was a change: this was a new favourite, and whilst the novelty lasted, Nella must reign pre-eminent, and she, Augusta Gifford, take the second rank. Let it be so; what had she to complain of? Surely, she thought, she was not wicked enough to envy the

strange power over the human heart that Nella seemed suddenly to exercise, as if by inspiration. A good woman, this Augusta Gifford, almost a heroine, but still with a touch or two of our poor humanity about her, to render her life-like, and her fair young head less near the stars.

Augusta thought at last that she was glad of this energetic aide-de-camp ; she tried hard to think so, for she had been always interested in her, and she believed in the heartiness of her own congratulations at the good which Nella was doing in her sphere. She did not believe that Nella was as judicious as herself in bestowing her money on the poor ; she thought that she was too kind and charitable in many cases, as easily impressed by a feigned sorrow as a real one—that she was even feverish and impulsive in her ministrings, in her anxiety to end the troubles of those with whom she mixed. But Miss Gifford was quite certain that she was glad of this extra assistance, and cared but little for the preference which in many cases was given to Nella, when she was startled one evening in the twilight by a question that made her know herself a little better. Nella and she had met in the village on the same errand, one Saturday evening. A woman was very poor, and had a sick and helpless husband to nurse ; and in the cottage parlour Nella and Augusta had

come face to face. When they both were in the country road again, Augusta said—

“I think, Miss Hewitt, I must ask you to call upon me shortly, to arrange a more systematic course of visiting in this parish. I am very pleased to find you interested in our village troubles, and ready to help us in a great good work; we have only to arrange our plans together to extend our sphere of usefulness.”

Nella's dark eyes looked inquiringly at Miss Gifford, as they went on side by side, but Nella did not answer.

“For instance, one of us lost time in calling upon Dame Williams this evening, and she is not the only woman in trouble in Deeneford.”

“Can a woman in trouble have too many friends to cheer her in her distress?” asked Nella.

“She should not have more than a fair share of support, if there be others suffering like her, for then some one must be left wholly destitute.”

“Oh, yes, I did not think of that,” said Nella. “I will call next Monday, and we will arrange together our plans, as you suggest. I hope that I have not offended you by interfering lately?”

“Offended?” cried Miss Gifford in surprise.

“Oh, it would be strange to be offended about that,” said Nella. “But I have fancied, during the

last two or three days—only fancied, of course—that you had not smiled so freely at me in our meetings, and I know now that I am always Miss Hewitt to you, never Nella. Perhaps you think,” she added in a lower voice, “that I am not so worthy as yourself to do good amongst them?”

Augusta Gifford felt the reproach innocently conveyed in these words, and all her little jealousies vanished on the instant.

“My dear Nella,” she cried, in her warm, natural tones, “you are as worthy as I am, and you must forgive me if I have been a little patronising lately; but all these people looked up to me, and now they quote your goodness, and seem not to care for me one half so much as they did.”

“And you thought what business had I——”

“No, not so bad as that,” cried Augusta. “I was glad of your help—glad to see your interest in our villagers; but a little hurt with them perhaps, like the selfish woman as I am, but not with you. I see now exactly what my brother Theo objects to, and, after all, what miserable vanity it is, and how we all ought to know better. Do all the good you can, Nella, cut me out of their good graces by your interest and kindness, and I’ll never murmur again.”

“Ah, you don’t know how they love you,” said

Nella, "how they look up to you, as they have a right to do. I tell them I'm not the good to them that you are. I can understand their troubles, I can give them enough of my uncle's money to relieve their present necessities; but I can't—oh, I can't talk to them as I could wish! For ever between my sympathy and their sorrow is my own unworthiness."

"You must not think that," said Augusta, taking her arm and walking on close by her side. "The past is gone for ever, and this is a new heart beating in the midst of the new life. You will do good here."

"If I could think so. I have been trying at a distance to imitate you, to follow in your steps, to become by degrees a faint shadow of you in this place when you have married Mr. Essenden, and gone away perhaps. I," she added humbly, almost reverently, "did not wish that they should miss you too much afterwards."

"Heaven bless you, Nella, for all these good thoughts!" said Augusta. "But you must not think too much of me, or copy me too much. Follow your own ideas rather than mine, for you see that I am inclined to be a jealous woman, and it is only your wild fancies that make a saint of me."

"I know your worth, that is all."

"I have not been at my best lately," said Augusta frankly. "I have had, Nella, a great deal to disturb me, for the path ahead is not all roses, as I had hoped it might be. I am only a fretful, disappointed woman, and you must not copy me."

"A disappointed woman?" said Nella, looking eagerly into the proud face of her companion. "How is that?"

"Oh, it is a long story, and in which I can make no one my confidante," said Miss Gifford.

"You are unhappy, then?"

"No, I do not own that," was the quick answer; "but I have been a little fretful lately, because, as I have intimated, I have been a little disappointed."

Nella was impulsive, ill-trained, and strangely interested. One more the equal of Miss Gifford would have remained silent after this, read in the firm face and the compressed lips a wish to keep her secret close, and to resent all interference with it; but the watcher guessed too readily the truth, and could not remain tongue-tied under the circumstances.

"You have quarrelled with Mr. Essenden!" she exclaimed, with an earnestness that brought the blushes to the cheeks of her listener.

"Quarrelled? I do not say that. How dare you ask me such a question?" cried Augusta, almost

passionately. Yes, a fretful and a disappointed woman now, upon her own confession. She was right.

"Forgive me, Miss Gifford, but I have been strangely anxious," said Nella, undismayed by the anger that confronted her, "anxious that you should be as happy as you deserve to be, and now you speak of disappointment. You can only be disappointed in your love, for that is what a woman feels most, and from which she suffers most."

"Why, how do you know that?" said Augusta.

"I—I have read it in books," answered Nella, "and I feel that it is true enough. Besides, you told me frankly, proudly, that you loved this Horace Essenden more than your own life."

"I must have been very enthusiastic and foolish on that day," replied Augusta; "not the staid sister of the staidest man in Deeneford, but a silly school-girl, with her head turned by the thoughts of her first sweetheart. Don't ask me any more questions, please."

"Your forgiveness for asking them," said Nella, with excitement, "but I must speak."

Miss Gifford regarded her with great surprise, but did not repeat her interdict on further questioning. Nella's wild manner had excited her curiosity.

"I am, of course, interested in you, Miss Gifford,"

Nella began apologetically; "I look back into my dark past and see you there—a figure like an angel, pitying me and stooping to me; and you must be always like that to me whilst there is gratitude left within my heart."

"You must not think so—it is not right."

"Therefore, I cannot hear of your unhappiness—of your disappointment," she said, correcting herself, as Augusta turned quickly to her again, as though to remonstrate against the former word, "as I could hear of my own or of other people's. You are different to me from all of them. I watch for you; I seem to live for you. I make, forgive me, your joys or troubles mine."

"This is more like madness than gratitude for the little that I have done, Nella," said Augusta, not unmoved by the passionate speech of this strange girl.

"Call it what you like, but believe in it," said Nella, still excited, "and trust in me a little. Not to the extent that you would trust in your brother, but to relieve me from the anxiety I feel."

"I don't make you out, Nella, now," she replied wonderingly.

"Don't try. I am not worth it; but I have been looking forward to your happiness so much."

"Well, Nella, I am not unhappy—there," said

Miss Gifford, smiling at the other's enthusiasm. "I have not taken my disappointment so seriously to heart as that; and I know that there are tasks before me which will always keep me patient. But my disappointment *is* connected with Mr. Horace Essenden; and—I hope that that will satisfy you, child."

"You are not going to marry him?"

"I—I think not," was the thoughtful, hesitating reply.

"What did you quarrel about?"

"We have not quarrelled; simply taken up our positions more apart from each other for awhile—a little tiff, as it may be termed. Pray don't cross-question me like this." And the fretful woman turned away her head to hide the tears that had risen for a moment to her eyes.

But Nella was a terrible companion at this juncture, and would have no mercy. Of the etiquette of society she knew nothing; she seemed to be even indifferent to the feelings of the woman whom she looked up to, in her wearisome persistency.

"Miss Gifford, I want you to tell me why you have broken off this match. I must know," she said, as Augusta seemed to grow taller beside her at this juncture; "for I am very anxious, not for my

own sake, but for yours. You must not proceed blindly on your path, trusting too much in what he has told you, or in the excuses that he may have made."

Augusta Gifford's face betrayed a new suspicion, and she said—

"Go on. You speak like one who has heard something from an eavesdropper; perhaps from one of my servants, for what I know to the contrary. Tell me what you know, or think you guess at."

Nella saw that she had betrayed too much, and answered slowly—

"I feel sure that Mr. Essenden must have acted villainously for you to give him up."

"Miss Hewitt forgets herself and me," said Augusta proudly; "forgets that she is speaking of a friend of mine."

"Still a friend of yours, this Mr. Essenden? You say that?"

"Yes."

"Why, then," her whole manner changing, "it cannot be so desperate a quarrel, and it will all come right in time, I am sure. It is only a little tiff, and I have fancied him utterly unworthy of you; for, of course, he must be in the wrong, not you."

"What a champion of my virtues you are," said

Miss Gifford, softening again; "but you really must be less impetuous and strange, Nella, to agree with the every-day world, and save yourself much future mortification and regret. You must not jump at conclusions, or betray too readily your interest in everybody. All this has been very foolish talk of ours."

"Yes, I think it has," Nella confessed.

"Because Mr. Essenden and I have had a little argument about perfect confidence with one another, and he has owned very frankly that he had not placed that confidence in me which I had a right to expect, he is not a villain, Nella. He is sorry for keeping back a fact from me, that is all."

"I wish that you had told me this at once," said Nella thoughtfully.

"Why?"

"I should not have spoken so warmly."

"I should not have told you now," said Miss Gifford, "only you are a girl inclined to think the best or the worst immediately, and for shallow reasons, too; and you must not put down Mr. Essenden in your black list. Always consider him a gentleman, Nella, and you will oblige me."

"I wonder what he kept back from you—what he could not find the courage to tell you?" murmured Nella.

Augusta had recovered her equanimity at last, and she laughed so merrily at this that the quiet old village echoed with the music. They were the old brisk tones of voice that fell upon her listener's ears once more.

"You are an extraordinary creature, Nella," she said, "you will have all the truth. I don't know what story you will brood upon if I throw not more light upon this common-place incident. Now, Miss Curious, are you listening intently?"

"Yes."

They were standing not far from Augusta Gifford's house, and here it was necessary to part. The twilight had deepened very much, and the stars were shining down upon them.

"Mr. Essenden told me—I did not find out, remember—that he was once in love with another lady."

"What lady?"

"Never mind that; that really is no business of yours, Nella," said Miss Gifford, inclined to snub her again. "And as he had told me all his life that I was the only woman whom he had ever loved, why, I was disappointed, and I have been disappointed ever since. Not that I could not have forgiven the weakness," she said, with a pleasant satire that showed the offence was not a

great one with her, and that Horace Essenden was not past forgiveness even then, "but that I felt he had not wholly trusted in me, estimated my character correctly or done fair justice to it. It may have been a little secret, but being a sensitive woman in some respects, I regarded it as a large one, and—— But I will not say another word about it. How I have come to tell you so much I hardly know."

"Thank you, Miss Gifford, for your confidence," said Nella; "I am glad that it is no worse, and had you treated it lightly in the beginning I should have betrayed less excitement in return. But you said that you were not likely to marry Mr. Essenden."

"Yes, I said that," replied Miss Gifford slowly; "perhaps I spoke in haste, perhaps I have been too hard upon him for his latter-day frankness, and he thinks that I shall never forgive him, having shown, possibly, too much spirit in this matter, and told him to think seriously of this engagement before he bound himself to one from whom he hid a paltry little story that was not worth disguising. For what is there to conceal between true hearts, Nella?"

"I think you love him a great deal still, Miss Gifford."

"Do you? Well, I am not going to argue that point with you now," she answered briskly. "I shall never be able to make you out completely, Nella, let me try never so hard. When you have a sweetheart of your own to trouble your head," she added laughingly, "perhaps you will not distress yourself so much about other people's lovers."

Nella drew a deep breath at this. She did not see the joke, or, having it thus suddenly presented before her, it dismayed her rather than brought the smiles to her face.

"Ah, Miss Gifford, you know!" she answered, with a heavy sigh.

"Yes, I know that you are earnest and true, and worthy of——"

"Pray say no more. I have chosen my life, and to the very end I see it. I go forth to meet it uncomplainingly," she said; "do not mock me by the way. Good-night."

She left Miss Gifford looking in a bewildered manner after her—more puzzled than ever, perhaps, by the character of her in whom she had long been interested. Nella went on at a rapid pace along the high-road towards the Upland Farm; she was nearing that part of the highway which diverged into two roads, when, to her astonishment, two men suddenly took their places, one on each side of her,

and kept step with her in the direction of her home. She looked nervously askance at these men, who might have risen from their graves, so suddenly and silently were they her companions, and her heart sunk at the sight of them. The man on her left was tall and stout, with a bushy pair of whiskers, a hooked nose, unmistakably Hebraic, and sharp little black eyes; the one on her right was short and stout, very pale, and somewhat dirty, and both men wore great-coats, with many pockets in them, and carried walking-sticks. Did she know them at once? Were they the shadows of the far-off days which seemed approaching nearer—shadows of which she had been wary in her darker life, and knew by instinct and by heart that they boded no good on whom they fell, and indicated always harm to her and hers?

“A fine evening, Miss Hewitt,” said the taller man.

“Yes,” answered Nella slowly.

They might be people in the village whom she did not know—new-comers, after all, proceeding to the farm on business, and these salutations were common enough in country places, and savoured not of rudeness.

“I am speaking to Miss Hewitt, I believe?”

“Yes, sir, certainly,” answered Nella.

"Otherwise," continued he, who seemed the spokesman for the two, "Miss Nella Carr, formerly of Joiner's Lane, Vates Street, and so on. I don't think, miss, that there's much good in denying it—I don't, upon my word; the case is far too strong. I'm very sorry to come here after you; but I wouldn't deny it if I was you, and that's a friend's advice."

"What makes you think that I am Nella Carr?" said she very slowly still, and slackening her pace towards the Upland Farm.

"We have been about this job some weeks," was the answer, "and the proofs are all compact enough. My name's Levy, of the detective police force, Scotland Yard. You don't remember me, I dare say; but I fancy that I can catch a likeness of the saucy girl in Vates Street, that used to give us so much trouble. Now, take my advice and don't try to make out you're anybody else, for it may go against you presently. You can't rub out the mark upon your arm, if you are Nella Carr; you can't deny that you left upon the grass a Sunday or two ago a Bible with your name written in it; and we can trace you from the Joiner's Lane to the boarding-school, from there to here, step by step, and as easily as possible. There, it's a friend's advice—don't deny it."

Nella knew that denial was hopeless before this summing up of the evidence against her, and felt that the advice given was the best that could be offered under the circumstances which had suddenly loomed forth to dismay her.

She came to a full stop, and they stopped also, one on each side of her still.

"Are you afraid that I shall run away?" she asked.

"Not exactly afraid, but we are generally prepared for any little dodge of the kind."

"Am I your prisoner, then?"

"Yes, Miss Carr; sorry to say as much, but that's the fact."

"And the charge?"

"Escaping from Grayling's Reformatory a little more than four years since."

"Oh, my poor father!" murmured Nella, and then her lips began to quiver for the first time;

"oh, my poor Paul!"

CHAPTER THE SECOND.

THE WORST OF NEWS.

ON that particular Saturday evening to which attention has been directed in our last chapter, George Hewitt was sitting in his farm parlour engaged in the important task of paying his men their weekly wages. Harvesting was long since over, and the extra hands had been dismissed, but there was a fair staff still about him, for he farmed many acres, and supported, perhaps, in one way and another, nearly half the village.

He was sharp, precise, and business-like on Saturday nights; always grave when money was in question, like one who knew the value of money or had worked hard for it in his day. The men stood in groups about the stack-yard waiting their turn to be admitted to the master's presence—that master who called each name forth in a sonorous voice from his seat by the money-bag, which name was shrieked in a falsetto by the servant-maid from the back door, and responded to by an “Ay, ay,” in a gruff bass.

Farmer Hewitt, as he was called, was beginning to be understood in Deeneford; the men liked him, and knew that he was a man to be trusted, and if he were hard upon them at times, why, he was only hard when they deserved it, and would have taken advantage of him. Not a genial character, but one who was not backward in a good word, although he had a grim, dry way of uttering it that robbed it of half its value.

The farm-servants were thinning; there were lights in the parlour, and Hewitt, over his accounts, was beginning to think that Nella was late in coming home. The man who was receiving his wages just then thought so also, but contented himself at first by looking furtively round the parlour and round the door at which he was standing; this was an old man named Grey, of whom our readers have caught a glimpse in the course of our narrative. When the money was in his hand, and he had occupied an unnecessary time in counting his shillings, he piped forth—

“I hope the young missus be well, Master Hewitt, this evening?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“She beant gen’rally out of the way on Saturday nights, but helps you with that book there—making quite sure that you don’t pay any of us twice.”

He laughed feebly at his own small joke, and then counted his shillings carefully once more.

Hewitt glanced at him from under his bushy eyebrows, knowing his customer pretty well by this time.

"The money's all right, I suppose, Grey?"

"Oh, yes, sir, quite correct," he answered. "And so Miss Eleanor be gone to the village, then?"

"I never said so," replied Hewitt, "but it's a fact, for all that. Do you want her?"

"Wull," with a sudden claw at his thin grey thatch, "I was a-thinking that if she'd been here to back me, I'd a-found the courage to ax a leetle favour on you, master."

"Oh, would you?" said Hewitt, scratching restlessly with his pen upon the cover of the book before him. "Well, what's the matter now?"

There was always something the matter with Mr. Grey, and something wrong with Mr. Grey's worldly affairs.

The old man shrunk at the sharp query, and blinked at his questioner before he answered.

"I've gone back awful in the rent, and it's a-preying on me and the old woman," he said. "It's a long story, Master Hewitt, but I'll tell you how it came about."

An artful old man this Mr. Grey, for he knew

well enough that Mr. Hewitt abhorred long stories, and would sooner aid him in his troubles than listen to his recital of them.

"No, you will not," answered the farmer. "I have more men to pay, and I can't listen to you all night. What do you want?"

"Three weeks money amost, I'm sorry to say," said Mr. Grey, "and to be spread over nine, so as I may find it easy to pay off; for you see——"

"Why, you old scapegrace, you have not paid off the last yet."

"No, but I'm a-going to by degrees. If it wasn't for the rent coming slap in the middle of my kalkulations——"

"I can't be helping you always," said Hewitt roughly, "or letting you have the laugh of me over your beer at the inn. You can have your next week's money if you like."

"That's not the least good, sir, for——"

"Take it or go. Hutchinson," said Hewitt, calling out the next name upon his list.

"Then I'll take it, master, and thankee; though if the dear young lady had only been at home, she would have said a word for an old servant," said Mr. Grey, beginning to whimper, and an unpleasant habit of whimpering he had when he could not get exactly his own way; "but the agent swears he'll

clear off every stick of furnitur if I ain't ready by Monday morning sharp. I do-o-n't know—oh, dear—whatever I shall do-o-o !”

“Hutchinson,” shouted Hewitt again ; and Hutchinson entered, cap in hand, and Mr. Grey, with a fortnight's wages in his hand, went shambling out of the room with a dolorous “Good-evening,” like a clerk's Amen.

“There's your money, Hutchinson, and call that old fool back again as you go out.”

The man did so. Mr. Grey returned, and was told by Mr. Hewitt that he could have the extra money, but that this was the last time he could really help him, and that he must be more provident for the future ; and then Grey went away, muttering his blessings along the passage, till he ran against a lady who was coming hastily in the opposite direction.

“Oh, I beg your ladyship's wery humble pardon,” said Grey.

“Where's Mr. Hewitt ?” asked Miss Gifford of him.

“In the parlour along with his money, mum,” he answered. And Miss Gifford swept past him, and entered the parlour with a grave self-possession, strangely at variance with her excitement of an instant since.

“Good-evening, Mr. Hewitt,” she said.

"Good-evening, Miss Gifford," he said, rising and bowing over the hand extended to him; "I am sorry to say that Eleanor is not at home."

"You will not object to my waiting for her here, sir?" said she, taking a seat before she had elicited a reply.

"Object—of course not," he answered; "but you will find my men in the way, I fear. This is pay-night."

"Oh, I don't mind that, thank you."

He sat down again, gave one shrewd glance towards her, took up his pen, and called forth "Smith," and "Smith" was wailed forth in response by the female on duty at the outer door.

Smith paid in full, and having nothing to say but "Thankee, sir," and "Good-evening," soon gave place to Green; and Green, being also a man of few words, to his successors.

"I hope you are well, Miss Gifford?" Hewitt said suddenly, between an exit and an entrance.

"Thank you, I am very well."

"You are looking pale."

"Do you think so?" she asked, and then she was silent, and another of Mr. Hewitt's regiment marched in and took his money. She was conscious that her hands had begun to tremble, and that her voice had grown somewhat husky; for between the

settlement of each account the grey eyes were uplifted from the book, and for an instant rested upon her, as though to read the meaning of her presence there.

"Nella is a long while coming home," he remarked presently.

"Yes," said Miss Gifford in assent.

"She helps me in these money payments generally, but there's some one ill in the village, and go she will, being headstrong and obstinate," he said with a pleasant smile, that gave a different interpretation to his words, "and so I work alone for once."

"For once," thought Augusta, and sighed heavily.

"Miss Gifford, you haven't brought Nella bad news, I hope?" he said quickly.

"No; I have not brought her bad news," replied Miss Gifford. "Will the men be much longer?"

"There are only two more to end the list," he said. "My men are wonderfully punctual to their time on Saturday nights. I never in all my life knew one to miss, in fact."

He laughed a little at this, with his piercing grey eyes bent on his visitor again, reading very accurately the trouble in her face. She did not even smile in return, though he had gone a long distance out of his way to perpetrate a jest. He thought he

guessed the riddle now—that Horace Essenden and Mrs. Gifford had been found out, and that Nella was wanted to confess all that she had discovered for herself. Poor girl, he thought; so this lady was going to lose her sweetheart too, as Nella had done only a little while ago.

The last man was paid and shut out of the farm, and Mr. Hewitt was tying the strings round the throat of his money bag, and looking hard at Augusta Gifford once more.

“You have missed Nella this evening?” said Augusta at this juncture.

“Yes; a little. In fact, I always wonder what has become of her,” he replied, “when she is out of my sight for any time.”

“You love her very much, Mr. Hewitt—almost as much as if she were your own child.”

Hewitt left off tying up the rest of his money to wonder if Nella had told his secret to this woman.

“Yes; as my own child—as the only one whom I have to love,” he answered slowly.

“We should not set our hearts too much on earthly affections,” said Miss Gifford; “for disappointments will surely come to us, and there are great shocks always to be borne. Nella may die.”

George Hewitt rose in his chair, and leaned across the table, all eagerness and horror.

"Go on—something has happened—and you have been sent to prepare me for the worst. I see now—I see that very clearly now. Go on."

In his excitement and suspense he had swept the money-bag from the table to the floor, where it had disgorged its gold and silver, with neither man nor woman taking heed. Here on the surface was a question with which money had nothing to do, and both were strangely agitated.

"Or Nella may live," continued Miss Gifford, still striving to break the news to him gently, despite her choking voice, "and yet be for awhile apart from you, sundered by that past mistake, that past misfortune, which may rise up at any moment to thwart the resolutions which you and she have formed. You would—for you are a strong man—you would I am sure be prepared for this, and say humbly, 'It is God's will.'"

"Have you come to tell me, Miss Gifford, that she is arrested?" he asked in a hoarse voice; "if so, tell me at once, and don't beat about the bush. Is she taken?"

"I am sorry, very sorry to say she is," was the reply. "She bade me——"

"Taken prisoner!" shouted Hewitt with a vehe-

mence that there was no restraining at last. "My girl snatched away from me by a law that will have no mercy, that will never understand her—see in her only what she has been, not what she is—my Nella, a—a prisoner? Where is she? Great heaven, what are we stopping here for?"

"She is at my house, where——"

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" he said fiercely, "instead of deceiving me with your accursed calmness, and waiting till all those fools were paid and gone?—why not have blasted me with your black news at once? Could you not think of her suspense—of every minute away from me? How is it that she is at your house still? I don't understand—I don't see—I must be going mad, I think!"

He dashed his clenched hands in his face, he struck the table with them, he called down all the curses of heaven on the heads of those who had brought about his misery and his daughter's capture, until Miss Gifford put her hands to her ears, and shrieked at him to desist.

He paused and looked at her.

"Ah, you don't know—you can't tell what agony I am suffering—what misery I see before her and me—what deadly hate and devilish thoughts will take the place of the little good that was in me,

whilst He was merciful. But He smites me with His awful hand, and I fall back to hell. How many are there with her?

“Two.”

“Only two,” he exclaimed, going to a cupboard by the fireplace, and kicking his money about the room. “Only two, and I as strong as twenty, and as dangerous. Only—— Well, what is it now?”

He turned his dark, forbidding face upon the woman, who had stolen to his side, and rested her hands upon his arm.

“You will come to my house; for Nella is anxious to see you, and these men, her captors, have been kind enough to allow that favour, and, almost against their instructions, have promised to wait for you, that you may see your daughter for a little while before she goes away to Kliston. You must not think of defying the law, of any violence, or of damaging irretrievably a case that can be presented in a fair, bright light before any judge in England.”

He paused to think of this, and his face softened somewhat.

“Yes, yes; and they were kind to Nella, you say; feeling for her, as well they might, borne away from home thus cruelly. No; I will not harm them.

There, the devil has gone further back, Miss Gifford."

"Will you offer me your arm, and let me tell you of Nella's message to you?"

"Thank you," he muttered. Then he took down his hat from its old place behind the parlour door, pulled it over his brows, and walked out of the room with her.

Miss Gifford locked the door upon the money that he had forgotten, and dropped the key into one of his deep pockets, as they went out of the house and along the garden path. In the roadway she took his arm, and he walked on with his face bent downwards. His passion was suppressed; it had burned itself out, it seemed.

"What did Nella say?" he asked in a low voice.

"That you were not to grieve too much for her; that she was strong and hopeful, and that, for her sake, you must be so also; that you would come to see her, and give her words of comfort, not dismay her by your own great grief."

"Poor girl, she is right," he said. "I'll not dismay her. She shall see how strong I am, how well I can bear up even against this, until the worst is known. And then——"

He shook his clenched fist in the air, as though in defiance of the star-lit heaven above him, and

Augusta noticed that his face changed strangely for an instant with the thoughts which crossed him. She did not attempt to reason with him—to preach of patience and resignation; presently that would become her brother's task as well as hers; let her think now of all that Nella had told her, and desired her to tell him.

She spoke of Nella's arrest, of Nella's sudden appearance at her house in company with the police officers, of her wish that she should come to the farm and break the news to him as gently as she could.

"She has great faith in you," said he; "she believes that only you know what is right and best. I have not thanked you for coming to me. I shall be more grateful, Miss Gifford, when I have time to think more."

"Yes; and——"

"Please leave me to myself," he adjured hastily. "I want to think now of her, and her new misery. Heaven help her, and all of us!"

"Amen," said the fair woman at his side.

Then they went on silently until the little villa was reached, and they had passed round to the back of the house, where Augusta tapped lightly with her knuckles at the window of a room on the ground floor.

"There is no occasion for precaution," said Hewitt; "the whole place will ring with the story soon enough."

"Yes," replied Augusta; "but she wishes to leave here quietly at least."

"Right; it will spare her something."

The blind before the French window was raised, the window was unfastened, and they passed into the room where Nella, with the two officers and a maid-servant of Augusta's, sat waiting for her father.

She turned very white as he came in, and rose with difficulty to meet him. Her arms stole round his neck, and she shed a few tears on his shoulder, after kissing him, and whispering to him to be as strong and hopeful as herself. He held her as in a vice, and looked over her bowed head at the officers of justice, as at the old enemies with whom he had waged his long and bitter war.

"Good-evening, Mr. Carr," said Mr. Levy politely. "It's many years since you and I have met."

"Yes, it is," was the answer.

"For the matter of that, I am sorry we've met now," added the detective; "but duty's duty, and it can't be helped."

"What proof have you that this is not my niece,

and that the girl Carr did not die long since? What——”

“Hush, father, this is of no use. They know everything, and there is no escape,” said Nella.

“Who told them?” he whispered back to her.

“Ah, I don’t know that.”

He put the question to them, but they only muttered that it would all be explained at the trial, they had not a doubt; they had had their orders, and the bird was caught.

“Why don’t you take me too?” asked Hewitt. “How is it that you let me escape—me, her accomplice?”

“Well, if you go on like that it won’t be easy not to interfere,” said Mr. Levy thoughtfully. “The least said is soonest mended always, Carr. There is nothing clear against you yet,” he added, with emphasis. “She mayn’t have told you she was ever at Grayling’s, and you did not reach Liverpool in the ship you came home by until after her escape, we find.”

“Pray do not say any more,” urged Nella; “you must be free to think and act for me in prison.”

“Heaven’s mercy on me, in prison!” groaned Hewitt—“you, of all God-fearing, earnest women in the world!”

“You must not grieve too deeply,” said Nella;

"rather feel relieved that the worst is known, and that there is no secret to hide. I can bear the very worst if you will only keep strong, and keep me strong."

"I will try," he muttered.

"After all, we were living in deceit, and I had defied the laws of my country," said Nella. "Better, surely—much better to work my sentence out, and come back to you the daughter whom you will always love. Let me still look forward to the shelter of your arms—to the home that you will preserve for me; for you have suffered and understood me, and can never—never turn away. Oh, you cannot think how reconciled I have already become to this—and how I only fear for you!"

"Don't mind me."

"You will keep firm?" she repeated.

"Firm and hard as a rock, Nella," he answered.

"Seeing how all this is for the best and——"

"No, I'll not see that," he cried doggedly. "I see only the unrelenting fate which has pursued and mocked me all my life. Don't preach to me your wretched consolation. There, there, I have startled you again, you who have such heavy troubles of your own, too."

"You will trust in her sometimes," she urged, pointing to Miss Gifford; "she is a friend who will

not desert us, who has always known what I was."

"A good friend, I acknowledge it," he murmured.

"You must think, too, how much worse than this it might have been," she said; "how, if I—if I had loved Paul, there would have been his heart to wring, his sorrows to alleviate—his accusations to sustain, perhaps, against the trick we would have played him."

"He would have known all, he would have borne all," said Hewitt, in the same low tone; "we might have been away from here for good instead of waiting patiently for ruin, and trusting in all the idiots who knew our wretched secret. A curse upon my sloth, that has brought about this end."

"Hush, hush; pray think of me," urged Nella.

"There, I will say no more, my dear," he answered quickly. "Don't mind me, only hope with me that the law for once, considering everything, will have some mercy on our troubles. Why is she going to Kliston?" he said, turning to the police.

"It's the only place where there's a decent lock-up in the district."

"She will go before a magistrate on Monday

morning, and, the case being simple, and requiring no remand, she will be committed to an assize court, I suppose?" said Hewitt.

"Yes, that's the form. How well you remember the law, Mr. Carr," said Levy drily.

"I bought my experience with years of practice," replied the farmer, "and my memory is retentive.—I shall not forget this day, or those who brought it round to me," he added to himself.

"I hope you feel that we've done the handsome by you," said Mr. Levy, always spokesman for himself and friend, "and that we haven't been hard with the young lady considering the circumstances?"

"Thank you, you have been kind. You proceed to Kliston at once?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"Well, we think of driving back in a little four-wheeler outside, that brought us over from Kliston this afternoon—that is, if the young lady don't object to open air, and wouldn't prefer a fly from the Deeneford Inn?"

She looked to her father, who said—

"The fly will bring a gaping lot of idiots about it. Let her go with you at once. I will overtake you on the road, for, Nella," turning to her again,

"I must be as near to you, and see you as often, as they will allow me till the trial."

"But the farm——"

"What is that to either you or me from this day? It dies out with the good name that we have earned here. Be kind to her, Levy," he said, as his arms relinquished their hold of her, "and you will find me grateful."

"Where are you going now?"

"Home for my horse. I shall be with you presently."

He kissed Nella, shook Miss Gifford's hand, expressed his thanks for all her kindness, and then strode out of the house and along the high road to his farm. He saddled his powerful mare in the stable, and brought the animal to the front gate, securing it to the fence whilst he passed into the farm and confronted the servants wandering restlessly within doors, as though they had already guessed the truth.

"I hope, maester, that nothing's the matter," said the house servant.

"You will know soon, Mary. Don't trouble me now."

"Nothing has happened to Miss Eleanor? Please say that, sir, for we be all anxious like."

"She is taken—ill," he added sharply, "rather

ill. Don't worry about it, don't believe all your hear on Monday—you who should know well enough what she is."

"The dearest and the best of girls," cried Mary. "Oh, sir, what has happened to her?"

"Haven't I told you?" he shouted forth. Then he unlocked his parlour door, entered, took the key out, and locked himself in for awhile; presently reappearing with a riding-whip in his hand, and a thick overcoat on.

"Your young mistress's shawl—quick," he said. Mary flew up-stairs to obey his command, whilst he stood in the passage flapping the side of his leg impatiently with his whip.

When she had come down he said—

"I have put the light out, and you can leave the place till the morning as it is. To-morrow you will find some money on the floor. Be housekeeper as long as it lasts, and when it is all gone write to me at the post-office, Kliston."

"Oh, dear, what can it all mean?" said Mary, bursting with curiosity, "and when will you be back, sir?"

He did not answer. He had wrenched open the front door by this time, and was striding down the garden path. A moment afterwards he was mounted and calling to her again.

"Here, take this. I am better without it, let me mean harm never so little," he muttered to himself.

"Oh, good lor, is it a pistol, sir?" said Mary, holding a small revolver at arm's length, and expecting it to go off every instant. "Oh, what am I to do with it, please? I never could abide firearms."

"Put it in my bed-room," he cried, as the horse began to plunge in the roadway.

"And when, sir, shall you be back to the farm?"

"Never," he answered, as he rode away.

He went rapidly, even furiously through the village, as though to avoid as much observation as possible, forgetting that the rate at which he rode would bring a few more Deeneford folk into the highway than were there already that Saturday night, and lead them to wonder, like his servants, where the farmer was going in such haste. At the first bend of the road, he nearly ran over old Grey, who was being led home by an irate wife from the inn, in the tap-room of which he had ensconced himself after receiving his money, in lieu of proceeding direct to his family, and he pulled his mare back on her haunches, and cursed the man for getting in his way. Then he was out of the village and galloping furiously along the dark country road, lashing his

horse as though her mad speed was not satisfactory to him even yet.

He came up with the chaise about two miles from Deeneford, slackened his pace, and passed the shawl to his daughter as she looked up wistfully.

"I was afraid you would be cold, Nella," he said. She thanked him and wrapped herself in her shawl, and Mr. Levy, who was driving, was polite enough to offer his assistance. Thus they went on, a swift, silent cortége, to the great town wherein it was considered safer to lock up so dangerous a prison breaker as Nella Carr had proved herself to be.

CHAPTER THE THIRD.

KLISTON ASSIZES.

THE great news of the arrest of Nella Carr did not keep till Monday, as her father had anticipated. The ill tidings spread after its usual fashion, and became magnified and distorted by diffusion. Mr. Levy, of Scotland Yard, and his factotum, had been two hours at Deeneford on the Saturday, had been there two or three times before, it was remembered, always putting up at the Deeneford Inn, and asking many questions of Mr. Hewitt's men, who came there when their work was over. One man, for reasons best known to himself, had recognised them as members of the police force, but did not call attention to that fact until they had driven off with the farmer's daughter, and her father had followed them on horseback. Then, before the shutters were closed upon the red curtains of the hostelry, the news oozed forth that Nella was a prisoner and had been carried away to Kliston.

No one knew for what offence, and therefore people

made wild guesses, and charged her by turns with all the enormities in nature, and so the news spread more and more, and Deeneford became wonderfully agitated.

It reached the rectory before nine o'clock at night, was brought by the village butcher with his meat, was circulated in the servants' hall, taken into the drawing-room, and even into the study of Mr. Gifford, thereby disarranging the concluding sentences of a powerful sermon for to-morrow. It took Mr. Gifford to the Upland Farm, where he had called so often and in vain upon its tenants—where he was always calling still, the farmer believed, out of sheer aggravation. He found that the master had gone away on horseback in a great hurry, leaving word that he should never come back. This news extended Mr. Gifford's journey to his sister's house, where he learned the truth at last, and sat down in the drawing-room bewildered by the revelation.

"Miss Hewitt was—was Nella Carr, then—the girl who escaped from the reformatory?" he said.

"Yes, it was she."

"When did she tell you?"

"I found it out, Theo."

"Bless me, did you? When?"

"The first time that I called at the Upland Farm."

"This is very strange, for it never struck me that Miss Hewitt and Nella Carr were one and the same person. You found it out, and then kept it a secret from me, fancying, I suppose, that I was not to be trusted with it."

He added this a little petulantly, for here was another secret which had been hidden away from him.

"It was her secret—neither yours nor mine, Theo—and therefore I had no right to divulge it. You might have distressed her and her father—for George Hewitt is simply George Carr—by your advice in their difficult situation."

"I am sorry you think my advice is generally so distressing," he said quietly, "though I might have suggested something which would have averted this miserable catastrophe. And I think, if she had told me, and——"

"Theo, that is all past, and the Carrs acted for the best. In Nella's place, I should have done the same. We must not think of the past, but of what we can do in the present for these two stricken ones."

"They never took me into their confidence; perhaps they will object to my putting myself out of the way in their behalf."

"They have not mentioned your name," replied his sister, "for they are people full of themselves just now, and we must not blame them for that."

We must use our influence right and left; hunt up our references to Nella Carr's new character, speak for her with trumpet-tongues that shall rouse the public in her behalf. Theo, I must save that girl. I see her in danger again, and on Wilton Heath I promised a dying woman that I would look after her child."

"What an enthusiast you are!"

"To go back to prison, to her past life, brother, to meet her old associates, and feel dragged down once more to their level—this poor girl who has striven so hard to rise from the depths: surely you must feel interested in this soul in danger, this member of your own flock beset by tribulation in her better days."

"Yes, I do, Gus," said Mr. Gifford, becoming a trifle excited himself, "and we will try very hard to save her, both of us. I went to school with a cousin of the present Secretary of State, I remember, and I daresay he can do something for us, and we will all speak up for Nella—ay, and with loud voices too. I see her danger, Gus, and will do my best with you, and all good friends, to save her from it. But, upon my word," he added, in a dry tone, as his old grievance rose to the surface once more, "she might have trusted in me. I could have given her very valuable advice."

"Which her father would not have allowed her to take. You know what an obstinate, hard man he is."

"Yes, that's very true, but he might have been reasoned with also, and I would not have objected to the time or trouble. I don't think that I have been treated well," he said, chewing the cud still of his complaint. "But, of course, it will not stand in the way of the efforts that I shall make in her behalf."

"And we will begin to make them at once," said Augusta.

"Certainly, as soon as possible."

"I have ordered a fly to Kliston, and shall start in half an hour."

"Bless my heart!" exclaimed the rector, totally unprepared for these decisive movements, "what for?"

"She will be allowed to see her friends to-morrow, I think; and to be shut in a police cell, without a friend to talk to her and comfort her, oh, that will never do! I was coming to your house for a few moments when the fly was ready, but this kind visit of yours has saved me time."

"Ahem. I hope you'll reach Kliston before Sunday morning."

"I hope so," answered Augusta. "If not, the

horses will work in a good cause. Kiss Laura for me, and tell Horace—— Oh, never mind, I have no message for him," she added petulantly.

"I am afraid, Gus, that you have not quite forgiven Horace," said the rector.

"He is not the subject at present, Theo," said Augusta. "Perhaps I have not forgiven him. I—I don't love him quite as much as I used. I don't feel that I can put that illimitable trust in him which once I could have done. But never mind him now," and Augusta dashed a few unbidden tears from her eyes as she spoke.

"I shall be at Kliston on Monday morning—Laura and I together, possibly," said Mr. Gifford.

"Very well, and then we will arrange our plan of action; find out Nella's father, see him and his solicitor, and beat up our witnesses. Your testimony will have immense weight, Theo; and I shall see my Nella free again—my poor Nella, of whom I was jealous only this afternoon."

"Jealous, Augusta?"

"Yes, of doing more good than myself. But I will not break into another story, for I can hear the fly rattling along, and I am eager to be gone. I can't settle here—I don't feel that I shall ever settle down again. How warm it is to-night; I think there must be thunder in the air."

She was not easy in her mind until Theo had seen her into the fly, and made sure that her travelling trunk was safely deposited on the roof, and then, with a farewell blessing on her precise brother, she was borne away in the current setting strongly in the Kliston direction.

The current set that way for weeks, for Nella Carr was taken before a magistrate on Monday, and committed for trial at the next court of assize, to be held at the goodly town of Kliston in the first week in November.

What a time it seemed in coming, although there was much to do for those whose hearts were stirred in Nella's cause, and many stones to turn in the great highway before the goodly array of facts were marshalled in her favour. Augusta and her brother Theobald were sanguine then ; the latter had grown almost as earnest as his sister in the matter, for his energy had increased in the pursuit of truth, and he had forgotten at last how the farmer and his daughter had slighted him by their reticence. A man who seemed to have grown more lined and grey since his last stroke of ill-fortune—and whom they met at Kliston very often, always loitering about the great gaol where Nella was a prisoner on remand—was not as sanguine as these two, and regarded things more gloomily. He was grateful

for their interest, though ; indeed, he had expressed his gratitude in words, when he had listened to all that they had done to assist in saving Nella from the law's severity ; but he shook his head, and said angrily that he knew human nature better than they did, and how human nature would judge of his girl's offence.

"They will condemn her," he said. "And after that, I must track step by step those who have brought about her ruin. They will have no mercy, and I will have none in my turn."

"You should not regard this case so seriously, or have lurking behind it any feelings of revenge on those who have injured you," said Mr. Gifford, in a reproving tone. "You cannot tell what may have been the motives that have led to her discovery."

"I will find out."

Mr. Gifford would have improved the occasion here, but George Carr—whom we will call George Carr to the end, now that he has dropped his disguise to the world—walked unceremoniously away from the good counsel that was about to be proffered him.

"What an excessively abrupt being he is," commented Mr. Gifford. "I don't think that I can ever like that man."

Still he was interested. He tried to lighten the

father's misery ; he obtained for him more visits to the prison than the rules allowed, he went constantly to see Nella, and to pray with her—rejoiced to see that with her at least all was resignation, even to the worst.

“To the best, perhaps,” as Nella said sadly. “I shall have worked out my sentence, and atoned for my last offence against the law.”

Her case had become a sensation case at last, and, as Augusta Gifford had prophesied, the public had taken up the story. It was a strange story—the evidence was conflicting, and there was much to be said for and against the prisoner. The dignity of the law must be upheld, said one ; the right of a penitent sinner to mercy, as well as justice, should be taken into consideration, said another. It was an intricate case, and there were rumours of fresh evidence accumulating—of the prisoner not being so good as her defenders wished to make out, and it was a relief to all who spoke for and against her when the judges came in state into the town, and the assizes of Kliston had commenced.

The trial of Nella Carr came off at length, and there were special reporters from London in the court, which was crowded, as one said graphically, “from floor to ceiling.” Not a very brief trial this of the pale, handsome woman, who looked before her

steadily at the judges—yet not particularly intricate, the witnesses being for and against the character of Nella, speaking to her present life or her past, as they were called in her favour or against her.

It had all arisen from an anonymous letter sent to Scotland Yard, in the first instance—a letter that had given rise to a few inquiries, which led to many more, and finally to this result. There was a list, an awful list of the past offences of the prisoner read aloud in court—of her sentences accumulating in length for each offence, until one judge, more merciful than the rest, had sentenced her to be placed in a reformatory for six years; and the good people from Deeneford held their breath, and were amazed at the enormity of her whom they had set up for their model. Then it was proved that Nella had been seen in the company of thieves at Joiner's Lane four years ago, and, ugliest fact of all, that her father, with whom she had been living under a feigned name, had been one of the worst and most cunning of London thieves, a desperate man who, having served his time out as a convict in Australia, had returned to England afterwards. Hence, from beginning to end of her career, always in bad company, said the prosecution for the Crown, and unworthy that false sympathy which a certain

portion of the press had attempted to arouse in her favour.

The witnesses for the defence spoke up well against this evidence; and the Reverend Theobald Gifford, and afterwards his sister, bore testimony to the better life of father and daughter, and of the esteem in which both of them were held in the village where they had resided. The principal of the school where Nella had been a pupil was there to speak of Nella's progress for three years and a half under her care, of her docility, earnestness, and anxiety to learn. Friends seemed to stream all day into the witness-box, and it was close on sundown when the counsel for the Crown sneered at all this superfluous evidence, and once again brought forward prominently the great fact that Nella Carr had broken prison—for escaping from the reformatory was virtually prison-breaking—before the expiration of her sentence.

A bustle in the court after the jury had retired, a stillness as of the grave when they came back at last, and "Gentlemen, are you agreed upon your verdict?" was asked them in a ringing voice. They were agreed; they found the prisoner "Guilty," but recommended her to mercy.

A whispering of everybody in court was followed by a demand for "Silence!" which had to be twice

repeated before the judge could speak. The prisoner had nothing to say in her defence, save that she was guilty of escaping from Grayling's, and that the secret and the guilt had weighed upon her heavily, and she was glad—looking towards a certain part of the court, where a man sat holding his head between two large-veined, sunburnt hands—that it was all over at last, and she need struggle no more. "Silence!" called forth again, and then the judge delivering his sentence calmly and gravely, as befitted his position. He spoke of the sin of prison-breaking at great length, of how in past times it was punishable by death, and then he adverted to the present good character of the prisoner, and her own efforts to amend after her escape. He begged the prisoner to understand that the law must be carried out, and that, under the strange circumstances, he passed upon her the most lenient sentence in his power. This sentence was that, after completing her term of imprisonment for two years—the time which she would have had to serve in Grayling's—she be condemned to four years' penal servitude.

Nella looked towards her father, and smiled faintly to show how strong she was, and the smile which he gave back to her before he buried his head in his hands again lingered in her memory for

ever afterwards as a something awfully unnatural. She was led from the dock—for, with all her courage, her feet were faltering very much—and as she passed away from the sight of the hundreds of out-stretched heads, George Carr pushed his way from the court, and was met in the High Street by the clergyman and his sister, whom he found waiting for him.

“It might have been much worse, Mr. Carr,” said Gifford. “But we have now to memorialise the Secretary of State to lessen the sentence, with which we cannot remain content.”

“No, not content with it,” he said, looking at his watch with feverish impatience, “you are right there. That sentence will kill her, and I cannot be content with it, though I can’t help her.”

“Are you going back to Deeneford?” asked Augusta timidly.

“I am going to London immediately. I can do no good here, and I have business of the greatest importance that takes me to town to-night.”

“Indeed,” said Mr. Gifford in surprise.

“Thank you both for speaking up for her; I can’t show my gratitude, but I feel it, brute as I am. Now let me go; don’t stand in my way.”

“When will you return to Deeneford?” said the

rector. "You will excuse me, but is not the farm being neglected in your absence?"

"If I went back to-night I should burn it down," he answered. Then he turned away, and went rapidly along the road, taking no heed of the crowds upon the pavement streaming from the court-house homewards full of the verdict which he had anticipated, and yet which seemed to have cast him back upon himself—that old, bad self, of which no one in his latter days had any knowledge.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH.

AT HIS WORST.

WITH the same set face—set to one purpose, as was evident by its determined expression—George Carr entered the Kliston railway station, and took a first-class ticket for London. After this he walked twice up and down the platform thinking very deeply ; he went into the refreshment buffet and drank off two glasses of neat brandy, returned to the platform, selected a compartment that was empty in the train, and flung himself into a seat with a groan, rather than a sigh, of relief.

To the first guard who looked in at the window he gave half-a-crown, in defiance of the bye-laws.

“Don’t put any one else in if you can help it,” he said ; “I am tired, and need rest.”

“All right, sir.”

He turned the collar of his coat up, pulled his hat over his forehead, contrived almost to set his shoulders about his ears, and then sat waiting for the train to proceed upon its way. It was within a minute

of the time of starting, and he should have speedily begun that search on which he was resolved. All that journey to London he could mature his plans to reach the object which he had in view, so that, setting foot in the crowded streets from which he had been long apart, he could begin his quest at once. He should never rest again—know peace again—until he had solved the mystery of Nella's arrest. The key of the railway guard rattled in the lock of the carriage-door, and he looked up with a scowl. A second guard, ignorant of the agreement existing between his contemporary and the solitary passenger, had opened the door and was admitting a tall man and a tall lady.

"Be quick, sir, please," said the guard; "train just starting, sir."

"This compartment is engaged," cried Carr.

"No, it isn't," replied the guard; "there's nobody else coming. As quick as you can, ma'am, if you please."

The new-comers, who had hesitated for an instant, stepped into the carriage, the door was slammed to noisily, the whistle of the guard was followed by the wild shriek of the engine, and the train glided on into the night.

George Carr took no further notice of his fellow-passengers. He cursed their intrusion in his heart,

and dropped once more into his old attitude. He would have preferred to be alone, but after all they need not intrude upon his thoughts, and the irritability engendered by their presence would wear off during the journey, unless he was more sensitive than he believed.

But, a blight upon them ! how they would talk—talk in whispers, too, as though there was a something in their conversation which must not reach his ears, and this annoyed him. Suddenly a man's voice said close to him—

“Surely it is Mr. Hewitt ?”

He glanced from under the brim of his hat, and recognised Horace Essenden, though he looked stonily at his inquirer, and by his firm denial for a moment puzzled him.

“No, sir,” he said in reply.

“I beg pardon,” said Horace, then he took a second and closer inspection of his travelling companion—“but—but it is a most extraordinary likeness.”

George Carr nodded his head at this, accepting, as it were, Horace Essenden's apology, and then wrapped himself more completely away from him. He thought that he had succeeded in baffling all curiosity, when a woman's voice addressed him this time—the voice of a woman whom he had only seen

twice in his life, but who remembered him too well to be deceived.

"Surely you must be my tenant of the Upland Farm?" said Mrs. Martin. "Where is the necessity to deny this to us?"

"My name is Carr, madam," he said, looking up at last: "Carr, the convict."

"Not to us, but Mr. Hewitt, a good tenant of ours," said Mrs. Martin kindly. "We, of course, know all your story, and are very, very sorry for it. We have been waiting at Kliston, to hear the result of this sad trial before leaving for London in search of a friend whom we miss—your friend, too, I may say."

"The only friend whom I had in the world they have locked away from me."

"Yours is a great misfortune," said Mrs. Martin; "but you should not give way to despair too readily. You must look forward to the time when she will be free again."

"After spending six years in a prison, where she will meet the worst and vilest of her kind."

"Can they affect one who is so strong now?"

"Heaven knows—I don't," he answered. "I have not the time to think yet, and I will ask you not to worry me by commonplace consolation. You did

not know her, neither did your nephew much, therefore you cannot feel for her or me."

"Yes, I can," said Mrs. Martin.

"After a fashion. I understand the feeling, and don't care for it. Please let me be."

He shut his eyes upon his misery and groaned. He could not see the end of it—it was beyond him; and these shallow if good-hearted prophecies only aggravated his sense of wretchedness.

Mrs. Martin, however, thought that it was in her power to do some good here. The story had deeply interested her; for she had heard all the truth from Augusta Gifford, and she was a woman not easily put down.

"Mr. Gifford talks of coming to London almost immediately, seeing the Secretary of State, to whom he has an introduction, and of using all his influence to bring about an alteration of the sentence. He will prepare a memorial, too; and I have even a hope that there are friends of mine in town who will interest themselves in this strange case. These are early times, Mr. Hewitt, to despair."

"I am Carr, a returned thief from Australia," he answered fiercely, "and I will not be called Hewitt any longer. I tried to be respectable, to be honest and humble in God's sight, to make atonement in my way for the past, and this is my reward for it."

"You must not talk like that," said Mrs. Martin, shocked at his vehemence; "you cannot drive a bargain with your Maker."

"No; I have found that out," he said with a short, fierce laugh, "and hence am more miserable in my new life than ever I was in my old."

"Still, Mr. Carr, we need not give way yet awhile," said Horace. "Your friends will rally round you, and be of help, let us hope, to your daughter and yourself. We are all anxious to bring about an alteration in the verdict."

George Carr looked intently at the last speaker, even was about to reply hastily to his remark, but checked himself, and contented himself with staring at him, till Horace felt uncomfortable.

"I hope that you believe me," Horace added earnestly; "and if there is anything that I can do to assist you in London, you may command my services."

"I don't want them," he replied. "I think and act for myself. As for all these prophecies," he said, turning to Mrs. Martin, "I regard them as idle and frivolous. They annoy me in my present state of mind, they seem to help me further on to madness, and, by all that's holy, if I have to leap out of the train to escape them, I will do it rather than sit here!"

There was passion, almost madness, in his threat, and Mrs. Martin was alarmed at it. She was not prepared for this outburst in one who had always been to her the most reserved of men, and she glanced nervously towards Horace, who motioned to her to say no more. Mr. Carr, however, seemed no longer disposed to be silent ; his tongue was loosed, and he continued in the same fierce tones—

“I can prophesy nearer the truth than yourself, for I know more of life, and of her, than you two. Madam, she will die in prison.”

“Oh, I hope not.”

“She is not strong ; the prison air and her own shame will kill her ; she is going back to the past from which she once escaped, and she will wither away in her cell—the one poor flower that gave such promise in the light. Oh, I see it all—I know it well enough, and there’s no mercy in the heaven you good people talk about !”

“Hush, sir,” urged Mrs. Martin ; “pray compose yourself, and talk not so bitterly of that which has been wisely ordered for the best. I am a lady, and demand your silence.”

“I did not wish to speak, but you two have touched an unhealed wound in your officiousness. You have been talking as to a child, and I am a strong man, whose will has not broken with his

heart. They will find it so in London—the devils who brought about my ruin.”

“Surely it is not revenge that takes you to town thus suddenly?” gasped forth Mrs. Martin, in her horror at him.

“Yes, it is. I swore to have it, and it is the only luxury I live for. What,” he shouted, “shall they exult over her downfall—her disgrace and mine, and think we are too weak and helpless to strike back in return: that one is in prison, and the other only an old dotard? They should have remembered what George Carr was in his worst days before they struck at him in the dark.”

“Who are these people?” asked Horace.

“I don’t know; one or two, or three, perhaps, with an old she-devil at the head, I think; and I will unearth them. There is not a haunt of theirs, not a thieves’ den in London that I do not know, and in honest homes such people cannot live.”

“This is unwise, Carr,” said Horace.

“I am an unwise man,” was the reply; “all my life I have not acted for the best. What did I want with a farm? And when I found gathering round me the faces that I knew, why did I stop with them until this end was reached? It is all a mystery of folly.”

He seemed inclined to relapse into silence, and neither Mrs. Martin nor her nephew were disposed to disturb him. But the effort at self-repression did not endure long, and presently he sat up and looked round him wildly, as though he had been asleep. He took his hat from his head, and suspended it above him, ran his hands through his grey hairs, and then commenced once more—this time in his old decisive tones, which rendered his conversation more supportable.

“I am glad now that I have met with you, Mrs. Martin,” he said, “for we can discuss other matters of moment, and I hope that I may rely upon your seconding a wish of mine.”

She was glad to see that he was composed and grave, and replied—

“In any way that I can assist you, you may rely upon me.”

“Thank you. I took that Upland Farm off your hands, and it is a good farm, that will always fetch a high price in the market. I want you to release me from the contract between us. I can never go back to it. I hate the place.”

“If, after serious consideration, you——”

“I have seriously considered it. This is no sudden thought of mine. I could not live there without her. I must be near her always.”

"Very well, then," said Mrs. Martin; "when you see my agent——"

Again he interrupted her—

"I shall never see him," he said; "but I will write to him to-morrow, and remit him the rent till next Christmas. I can call a sale at any moment now, and that is a relief to me. Thank you once more. I thought that I should never be grateful for anything again, but I am for this, at least."

"Let it stand as a proof that you may be grateful for many things yet," said Mrs. Martin gently: "the future is impenetrable."

"And dark," he added, and then the conversation appeared to be suspended on both sides by tacit agreement between them.

The train rattled on to London, shrieking past the lighted stations, dashing on through cuttings, along embankments, in and out of tunnels, at one steady express speed, which brought the great city very near at last. George Carr had closed his eyes, and might have slept through the remainder of the journey for any movement that he made. Aunt and nephew glanced at him and at each other occasionally, the latter shrugging his shoulders once, as at the folly, the obstinacy, or the past rudeness of a man less civilised than he was. It was a very stern face in its sleep—if George Carr really slept—hard

and inflexible, with the thick grey eyebrows drooping forbiddingly over the eyes, as if in his dreams he had met those enemies who had marred his happiness. His hands rested on his knees, and were tightly clenched, as though they held a villain by the throat, and his breath came quick and short, and was like that of a runner making his way with difficulty up-hill, but with the vigour in him still to reach the summit, if his heart burst not in the effort. If a sleep, it was a painful, unrefreshing one, from which he emerged the instant that the train stopped for the guards to take tickets, and the London house-tops were stretching miles away beyond the carriage window through which he peered.

"This is a good train from Kliston," he said, putting on his hat again; "we have come at a fair pace."

"Yes," said Horace in reply; "when one is in a hurry to reach town, this seems the only train of any service to him."

"What have you been in a hurry to reach town for?" was the sharp inquiry.

Horace did not like the tone in which Mr. Carr addressed him; all through that journey there had been a contemptuous ring in it, he fancied. Was it likely that his daughter Nella had taken that man into her confidence, and told all his foolish love

story? he thought. Could she have been as faithless to her word as that?

"We have heard that my brother's box is still at the booking-office in London, and are anxious concerning Paul. We are going the round of our friends to make inquiries, the round of the shipping agents, and so forth. My aunt could not remain longer in suspense."

"He is at sea by this time," said Carr.

"What makes you think that?" asked Mrs. Martin eagerly.

"He was always fond of the sea," replied Carr; "and if he had been in England he would have come to me in my trouble, unless a greater scamp than I take him for."

"Paul was never a scamp, sir," said the old lady indignantly.

"And yet he may be in London, which is a great hiding-place," Carr said thoughtfully, "and my trouble has dismayed him and disgusted him. For he was a gentleman, and yet he loved a woman who had escaped from prison. You know that story, I am sure?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Martin.

"And it is likely that he did not care to be mixed up in so low an affair as this—did not care to see her or me, lest his name should be dragged into

court, and he become a laughing-stock in the county afterwards. For he could be proud enough when he liked."

"You do my brother an injustice, Mr. Carr," said Horace sharply. "Had he heard of this case he would have come to Kliston. He is always generous to a fault, and in a friend's cause he is a hero."

"I used to like him," said Carr thoughtfully, "but I don't like anybody now. I seem to have lost my faith in humanity, and if he has stopped away in our trouble, why, I will never forgive him. Here is London at last, and I am glad."

He stepped on to the platform after Mrs. Martin and Horace, and with a sullen nod to them would have walked away had not Horace caught his arm.

"Will you tell me where you can be communicated with?"

"No, I will not," was the reply. "What do you want my address for?"

"I may have news for you, and I—am interested in you, and anxious to be of service."

"You?"

There was no mistaking the contempt in that reply, but Horace bore with it, and was very humble and energetic in his new appeal.

"We know little of each other," said Horace, "but your troubles are great ones; you seem unable

to support them, are wild and strange, and I would, even for my brother's sake, be of help to you in some way. I may think presently in what manner I can be of service to you and your daughter, and I don't like you to leave us thus desperately. I don't shrink from your past, Carr; let me be your friend."

Carr saw that he was in earnest, and looked at him in surprise.

"Impossible," he said, shaking his head.

"Will you remember that we shall be at Morley's Hotel for the next fortnight. You may wish to see me on business of your own—business of the farm—or recollect that in some way my services may be of use to you."

"Why are you anxious?"

"Your friend Paul left you in charge to me, bade me, if ever trouble came to you, to take his place and stand by you as he would have done."

"Well, well, he was a good fellow," said Carr, "but I can take my own part in the world still."

They went along the platform amidst the crowd of travellers, they paused where an extra crowd was centred round the luggage, and as Horace turned to address a guard concerning his portmanteau and his aunt's boxes, George Carr, glad to escape his importunity, stepped from the platform

into the road amongst the cabs and carriages, and disappeared. When Horace and his aunt looked round again, George Carr, alias Hewitt, was gone. All the way from the Great Northern terminus to their hotel aunt and nephew were very silent, thinking of their stormy ride to London, and of the restless being who had hurled back at them all their offers of assistance. In the hotel they were thoughtful, too, over their supper, and Horace said at last—

“You are tired with your journey, aunt?”

“Yes, Horace, I am very tired,” she said wearily; “and that man troubles me.”

“Indeed—why?”

“I can see his face now in the light of the carriage lamp,” she replied, with a strong shudder at the reminiscence—“a relentless face, and full of hate and bitterness. It is well that such a man is no enemy of ours.”

“He would have no mercy if we were in his power,” said Horace thoughtfully.

“Which we can never be, thank heaven,” said Mrs. Martin. “I wonder what our Paul saw in such a man to like?”

“Paul had strange fancies.”

“Yes, that is true,” said the aunt, thinking of Nella Carr, and of her six years of prison-life, as she rose to bid her nephew good-night.

"Good-night, aunt," he said, "and to-morrow to search for Paul, and, by good luck, to find him."

"Ah, I have not much hope of that."

"I have. He would not have gone to sea without his favourite chest, at which he laughed so often, but clung to so persistently."

"Well, you are sanguine, and your sanguine nature, Horace, has brought me to town with you. Are you going to your room now?"

"Yes; immediately after my cigar."

"Good-night," she repeated. And then, after he had kissed her, she went out of the room, leaving him there, a thoughtful figure by the supper-table. He sat for a quarter of an hour very quietly, totally unmindful of the cigar which he had promised himself, and looking hard at his empty plate, as if in doubt whether he had had sufficient supper or not.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet, snatched his hat from the side-table, and went out of the room, and down the broad stairs into the street, crossing over to the long row of cabs on the opposite side, and hailing a Hansom as he crossed.

"Where to, sir?" asked the cabman, looking through his trap, when Horace Essenden was seated in his vehicle.

"Vates Street, Whitechapel," was the answer.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH.

VATES STREET.

ALONG the Strand and Fleet Street, crossing the main artery of Farringdon Street, up Cheapside, past the Bank, crossing the second artery of Gracechurch Street, where human life flows to and fro unceasingly, down Fenchurch Street and the Minories, into the great thoroughfare of Whitechapel, where business was brisk still, though it was close upon eleven o'clock by Horace Essenden's watch as he leaned out of his cab to catch the light upon it.

Only a few of the most respectable shopkeepers had put up their shutters. The streets were full of late buyers—pale-faced people who got back late from work, and then had their marketing to do before bed-time; and the costermongers' barrows were trundling up and down the streets, and lingering at street corners when the official eye was off their owners for awhile. All the shops were open: the cheap clothiers, with their wealth of gas and glass lustre, and their energetic young men lying in

wait behind the dummies at the door to pounce upon the pedestrian who stayed to mark the prices, or admire the splendour of the fittings; the pork-butchers, with their savoury meats, black-puddings, and pease-puddings, the latter retailed in ha'porths, on small pieces of paper, for young starvelings who eat their suppers on the kerbstone; the bakers, where the bread was rising every week now; the butchers, where joints seemed cheap enough; the hot sheep's-head emporiums, in alternate streets branching out of Whitechapel Road, and combining cat's-meat and tripe with the luxury first alluded to; the gin-palaces, very full, busy, and noisy; the cheap concert-rooms, whence much of the scum of Whitechapel would issue in another three-quarters of an hour; and the various penny entertainments, whose proprietors touted for customers outside as vigorously as though they had not been shouting forth the attractions within since twelve o'clock that morning.

It was a busy part of the world, a new part of the world to Horace Essenden, who knew not how three-fourths of his fellow-creatures lived, suffered, and died on the eastern side of our gigantic hive. He prided himself upon the refinement of his nature, the delicacy and taste of his ideas, and the squalor and noise about him were not pleasant to confront.

The cabman knew nothing of Vates Street, and had to put several questions to a policeman, who was so full of information that it was impossible to understand him. There were first and second turnings to the left and right, and then down by a beer-shop, and then keep straight on till you come to a brewer's, and then more turnings, till the cabman and Horace gave it up in despair, and resolved upon further inquiries after the preliminary directions had been mastered. The cabman turned his vehicle out of Whitechapel into the dimly-lighted streets, and very speedily lost himself and his fare in the maze of streets which appeared to spring up on purpose to confound him.

"Dashed if I ever had such a fare as this before," he grumbled. "I wonder what the gemman wants down here."

Still Vates Street was reached at last, and a cut-throat-looking street it was, that might have deterred men of stronger nerve than Horace Essenden, who stood hesitating, after he had stepped out of the cab into a deep mudbank, that in its blackness and solid aspect he had mistaken for the pavement. The gas seemed to burn worse here than in the streets beyond, as though it had a fouler air to live in, and the figures that flitted to and fro seemed of ragged and forlorn women and children only fit for the darkness

in which the place was wrapped, and of men who walked close to the wall, and glanced furtively at the stranger as they passed, as if distrusting him and the motive that had brought him thither.

"Wait till my return," said Horace, making up his mind to prosecute his adventure to the end; and the cabman, after deliberating for an instant on this order, and remembering that Horace had come from Morley's, replied, "All right, sir," and proceeded to light his pipe and make himself as comfortable as circumstances would permit until his fare's return. Horace plunged into Vates Street, and speedily secured a small guide—a little child with the face of an old woman in its acuteness—to direct him to the number of which he was in search.

There was no knocker to the door of the house—it had been wrenched off long since and sold for old iron—and Horace applied the handle of his walking-stick to the panels without producing any perceptible effect. Several of the lodgers heard him, but as that particular knock was new, it was nobody's business to attend to it. There was a long string with a knot at the end of it, which he pulled at last, and found that by that means the door opened and disclosed a passage black as night, on the threshold of which he paused to consider again the advisability of proceeding in his search.

"Yes, it is necessary," he muttered; then he went slowly along the passage, groping for the first door, which he was sure must be somewhere on his left. He found it, knocked loudly, and was rewarded for his perseverance by the sound of a human voice consigning him at once to regions remote for "kicking up that row."

"What do you want?"

"Mrs. Wisby," said Horace. "She lives here, I believe."

"I can't hear a word you say," called forth the voice. "Open the door and come in, will you?"

Horace groped for a handle and found it. He opened the door and went a step or two into a room, where a man was in bed, as he could see by the red glow of a fire burning in the grate.

"Who are you, waking up a feller like this?"

"I beg your pardon; I did not know you were in bed," said Horace; "but I am anxious to find a Mrs. Wisby, who, I believe, is lodging here."

"She's a-dying here, cuss her," cried the man, "and time she did, for that matter."

"Dying?"

"You'll find her in the top room of the house. It's a reglar horspittel between us two. She got over her complaint two weeks ago, and then broke up all of a sudden like, just as she had started

another of her little schools. Do you mind reaching me that glass of water on the mankelpiece? I've been choking for arf an hour, but I aint the strength to get out of bed arter it. The woman who tidies up and nusses me a bit has gone home till the morning. I wished she'd dropped down dead afore she'd put the water there."

Horace's eyes had become accustomed to the light, and he moved across the room to reach the glass for the sick man.

"Thankee, old feller," said the invalid, who detected the movement to assist him; "pr'aps when you've got the small-pox awful bad I'll do the same for you, and—— Hollo, where are you going?"

Horace was gone. He put down the water-glass, and disappeared with extraordinary alacrity, closing the door after him to exclude the infection from the passage. He went back into the street for a breath of cool air after this, and as he stood there, the oaths of the man in the front parlour seemed to come straight at him from the dark passage of the house.

"If I should catch that disease and die now," muttered Horace, "what an end to me after all my care of myself!"

Another moment's hesitation, then he stamped his foot upon the grimy pavement, and nearly

frightened to death a lank cat, who was lapping greedily at some stagnant water in the roadway.

"I will go through with it; I was never a coward," he cried, "and see her for myself I will."

As he turned to re-enter the house, a man in an apron, and with a box upon his back, shouldered him out of the way.

"Hollo, where air yer a-running to? Can't yer see me—I spose I'm big enuf to see?" the man said.

"I did not see you," was the quiet reply.

"Vich is Mrs. Wiserby's? Is the crib anywheres about? for this box's blessed heavy, I can tell yer."

"Up-stairs, the top room."

"Front or back room?"

"I don't know. I am going up myself in search of it," said Horace.

"Go fust, then, and find out, for I'm orful sick of this job. It's nuffink but boxes in and out with Mother W., they tells me, and I can't make her out."

Horace led the way. He was glad of a companion in this thieves' den, and he went up slowly and cautiously in the darkness, the stairs creaking ominously with the ascent of him and his companion. At the top of the house he came upon another old-looking

child, small of stature and rickety of form, like a sister of the one who had acted as his guide.

She held a small piece of candle in her hand, and it guttered over her fingers and on to the heads and shoulders of the new arrivals, as she held it aloft to take stock of her visitors.

"Wot's your game?" was her salutation.

"Which is Mrs. Wisby's room?" asked Horace.

"In there—the back un. Are you the doctor?"

"I am a friend of Mrs. Wisby's."

"You'll find her awful bad then. I'm her nuss, and a nice berth I've got of it. The doctor says she'll last about two hours, or else I'd cut this fun. Wot's she to do with me? Wot's the good o' me a-wasting o' my time here? Hollo," to the second comer, who arrived panting at the landing-place, "wot's the game with you, too?"

"Here's a big box for Mrs. Wiserby, and there's fourpence to pay."

"We ain't got no fourpence," cried the girl.

"Then yer won't have it without."

"Ax the old gal if she's got fourpence. I know she's got some money in her bed somewhere, and she's sensible enuf. Where's the key of that box?" she asked, with eyes that brightened up with thoughts of a future raid thereon, after Mrs. Wisby had departed this life.

"How should I know?" replied the man; and then Horace Essenden, the porter, and the child-nurse went into the back-room, and the latter put back the candle in the ginger-beer bottle from which she had extracted it.

The feeble light showed the unmistakable countenance of Mrs. Wisby, lowering over a ragged patch-work counterpane, and a grey and hideous face it was, with the look of coming death upon it. Horace knew that the woman's time was come, and even felt relieved at the knowledge.

Mrs. Wisby's eyes took in her visitors at once, and her voice, very thick and husky, said with difficulty—

"What do you want?"

Horace replied for himself, as the porter lumped his box on the bare boards with a noise that shook the house.

"To see you, and to warn you. Do you recollect my face?"

"Yes, I think I do. At Deeneford, wasn't it?"

Horace nodded assent.

"I come to tell you that Nella Carr is in prison——"

"Is she though?"

"And that her father is in London searching for you."

"He'll never think that I've got back to Vates Street, and why should he come after me? Drat this ketching in my throat, what is it?"

"I come to suggest that you should change your house, but——"

"Oh, I won't stop longer nor I can help, you may be sure; for that Carr is a drefful devil, and I wouldn't a-meet him for the world. I'll go to-morrow, if I'm better."

"She won't believe she's a-going to hook it," explained the child, with quite a merry laugh at the joke of Mrs. Wisby's faith in her powers of endurance. "That's how she keeps a-going it, sir."

"Nobody's a-going to frighten me about my dying, yet awhile," said Mrs. Wisby, nodding her head emphatically. "I'm stronger than I was yesterday, though you see how I've been served agin—robbed right and left—everythink tooked clean off. What are you a-bringing that great box into the place for?"

"It's swag," was the laconic answer of the man, wiping the perspiration from his dirty face.

"Swag, is it?" said Mrs. Wisby, with extraordinary eagerness. "You don't mean that. Did any one—oh, drat this ketching—did any one see you come in with it?"

"On'y this swell. It's from Mason's. We've got

the tip that there's to be a search, and thought it'd be safer with yer for awhile. There's fourpence to pay for bringing it, o' course."

"Not out o' me," was the quick answer. "I don't want the box."

"Yer'll have your share for minding it."

"So will you."

"No, I aint in the job. I don't want to be in it. I on'y want my fourpence, and I shan't go till I get it," and the man sat down on the box and folded his arms defiantly.

"You'll get no fourpence out o' me."

"Yer knew it was coming?"

"I didn't."

"Yes, yer did. That's yer usual way, a-purtending to be so mighty innersent, I hear; but it won't do with me."

"I'll give yer a bit—o' my mind—arter this gentleman has gone," said Mrs. Wisby significantly. "Have you anythink more to say to me?" she asked Horace.

"No," said Horace, impatient to withdraw. "I have warned you, and you will study your own safety."

"Who split upon the gal?" asked Mrs. Wisby, "was it——"

"I don't know; you did, perhaps. Are you in

want of money?—you seem in terrible poverty here?”

“They aint left me a rap—everythink is clean gone,” said Mrs. Wisby, beginning to whimper. “If you can lend me a suverin till I see you agin.”

“My eye, till she sees him agin!” cried the child.

She burst into a second shrill laugh at this, waked the man, who was beginning to nod with fatigue upon the box, and roused the ire of Mrs. Wisby.

“I’ll remember you, my gal,” said the sick woman, “see if I don’t! I’ll——”

She paused to clutch her throat, and remonstrate with her “ketching” again, her greedy eyes watching the purse which Horace Essenden had drawn from his pocket.

“Here is a sovereign,” said Horace. “I will put it——”

“Give it to me—give it to me; it isn’t safe anywheres about,” she gasped forth, and Horace put the sovereign in the yellow hand that was dragged from the bed with difficulty to receive it.

He murmured a good-night after this, and hastened away from the room, shuddering at the horrors which he had voluntarily sought in his strange concern for Mrs. Wisby’s safety, and sure in his heart that she would not live the night out, for all her own doubts in the death advancing to her. All was safe

—as he could have wished had he had the power of wishing it.

Mrs. Wisby did not betray any interest in his departure, but fidgeted with her hands underneath the pillow until her sovereign was securely deposited in some receptacle in the bed, and that task being accomplished, she said—

“Shake that sarcy wretch, Kitty ; and if he bullies me agin, call to the boys underneath to pitch him down the stairs, or out o’ winder. I s’pose,” she added thoughtfully, “they’d do that for the old woman yet, though they aint treated her like a lady lately. Wait a minit till my breath’s more easy.”

But the man had awakened for himself, and was walking stealthily across the room towards her.

“You wretch, you want the suverin’,” said the excited Mrs. Wisby. “Run down, Kitty, to the boys !”

“Stay where you are,” shouted the man. “I don’t want your money. Mother Wisby, do you know me ?” he asked, bending his face down close to hers.

The woman began to shudder in her bed, and then said slowly—

“I think so. It’s George Carr—isn’t it ?”

“Yes, it is George Carr,” was the answer.

CHAPTER THE SIXTH.

MRS. WISBY MAKES HER LAST CONFESSION.

MRS. WISBY had not strength to shrink away from her unwelcome visitor. She shut her eyes and shivered at her danger, knowing what a desperate man George Carr had been, and remembering too well his last awful threats of vengeance if she ever played him falsely. He would think that she had not been true to her "school," and before waiting for any explanation would pounce upon her throat and shake the life from her. It was not likely that George Carr would spare her—take into consideration her years and infirmities—and leave her to jog on peaceably and comfortably to the end, which was possibly not very far off; though she should get over this illness, if people would only let her alone and not worry her too much. But there she lay, weak from a long illness, and with George Carr standing like a Fate before her. She opened her eyes again to look upon the intruder, and found that he had seated himself in a rickety chair by the bed-

side, and was regarding the floor with a strange, perplexed gaze, as though he had not quite made up his mind to kill her yet.

"I don't think, Carr," she said in a low voice, "that you're coward—enough to hurt—an old pal—brought down so low as this. You—you warn't unjust like, when put out ever so much."

"Keep your miserable life to the end, woman," said Carr, without looking towards her. "I do not envy it. I wish to God I could change places with you!"

"I wish to God you could," was the strange echo here, followed by a sigh over the impossibility of the exchange. "Oh, to have your strength, to be able to walk out of this place, instead of a-laying here and on'y getting back bit by bit the use of my limbs. I've been orful unlucky agin, Carr; nuffink has gone straight with me; and then"—pausing to struggle with her breath for awhile—"this nasty ketching in my throat—so partikerly uncomforbel."

For a woman whose hours were numbered, and on whose face the death-warrant was plainly marked, her powers of reasoning were marvellous. The guilty mind appeared to have outlasted the body, and to be strong still—to possess the faculty of looking forward as to years of life which she might enjoy, unrepentant and defiant.

"What do you want, George?" she asked after another pause. "Is there—is there anythink that I can do to help you? You're one of us, and I will do my werry best allers for a pal."

"You betrayed me and my girl," he said, turning to her with a sudden fierceness which made her close her eyes again; "you sold us for money to that arrant villain who came in here to-night with me. On your dying bed, old woman, don't deny this, but tell me all the truth."

"Don't look so hard at me," whispered Mrs. Wisby. "I'll tell you everythink I know, if my ketching will let me. I didn't split—on Nella."

"I am aware of that. You heard the news of her arrest and trial, for the first time to-night, from him?"

"Yes, that I did."

"Well?"

"He knew all about you and her and me; he found it out on that night when I come to your farm—for he followed Nella and me, and heerd all we had to say—to one another under the trees; and when—— Wait a bit."

Mrs. Wisby's hand clutched her throat, and she lay glaring at George Carr and panting fearfully for breath. He was afraid that she would die without telling him all, and he waited impatiently for her further explanation.

"Go on," he said.

"It's no good being in a nurry, gov'nor," said a voice behind him, and George Carr was reminded of the child-nurse being still a listener. "She'll pull up short like that 'arf-a-dozen times a day, and have sich a kicking for her breath. It's not bad fun to watch her."

Carr glanced at this child curiously. Sharp of speech, devoid of feeling, quick of eye and hand, she was a girl like Nella had been once; a poor little wreck, whom no one cared to train to good, and who, homeless and parentless, drifted, with hundreds like her, into dishonest hands. She had been brought up to hate all those whose chances had been better than her own, and to think that it was natural that she should war against them.

"Leave us," said Carr.

"Oh, yes—that's likely," replied the girl, who had taken her old seat on the box. "You don't think I'm a-going to sit on the stairs in the cold at this time o' night, or go out in the streets agin? This is the on'y home I have."

"Ah, I suppose so."

"The night air's cold too, I can tell you. I don't quite see my way through the winter when the old gal's gone, for they're down upon me in Vates Street, and I haven't no pals now. They all cut

away but me when she had the small-pox, 'fraid of their mugs being spiled. I stuck to her, you see."

"I see," answered Carr absently.

"Not that I cared about her much—oh no," said the girl, swinging her legs to and fro, and kicking her heels against the box; "but I'd nowhere else to get to, and she warn't exactly a bad sort, and I wanted her dress and flannel petticoat arter she was gone—not her money, they hooked it with all that; and oh, lor, didn't the old gal swear arter she found they tooked it from the place she hid it in! There was bank-notes, Mr. Carr—for she said so—and they thieved 'em all. If I'd had my chance," she added thoughtfully, "I would have left her one or two on 'em, at all ewents."

"You wouldn't have touched 'em at all, Kitty," said Mrs. Wisby at this juncture. "I'm sure you wouldn't have done it."

"Oh, don't you be too sure of anythink, Mother Wis," answered the child. "I've to look out for myself, and——"

"That will do," said Carr, interrupting her. "Don't speak again—I have more questions to ask her."

"Oh, I don't want to speak; I'd get a nap, if it wasn't for your growling woice," said Kitty, flinging herself full length upon the box, and bury-

ing her weazened face in her arms. "Cut it short please, old man, and go away."

Carr turned eagerly to Mrs. Wisby.

"This man—this Mr. Essenden, of Deeneford—was at my house on the night you came in search of me, and I bought your silence, as I thought, for a hundred pounds. He followed you and Nella, and heard all the story—who Nella was, and what you wanted with her. Well—go on."

"I shouldn't like to be that handsum man, Carr," said Mrs. Wisby slowly, "for another hundred pounds—or for awhile even to change places with him, with you arm's length of me."

"Go on. He overheard you?"

"Yes, and rather skeered me when I was a-coming round to the front of the farm—for the money as you promised me. Would you believe it, all that money—was walked off—with too, and——"

"Yes, yes—I know. You were coming round to the front of the house. I remember that you were a long while making your appearance, and I could not understand the delay. He had met you then?"

"Yes, and said he knew all, and was an old pal of yourn?"

"He gave you more money?"

"Not then he didn't—he wanted to know where he could bring me some—and tell me somethink

more about you ; and I met him the next day—and got his money, and we talked over old—times together, till I began to see his game a bit.”

“He was in our power, and he wished to place us in his—to hold a secret for a secret. Yes, it is all plain enough.”

“When—and I wish I mayn’t get over this illness if I aint speaking truth—when I saw that he wasn’t on the square, I got fidgety ; and he—he promised me that he meant no harm to anybody, and was on’y curious—about it all. I gived him my address then, and begged him at all ewents to write to me—whenever it come to pass that Nella was dropped upon, for I knew that you—would lay it all on me. But, George Carr, as I hope to live, I wouldn’t have—blowed upon you for the world. Take my hand on it, and—think so.”

This was a very long speech, and occupied a considerable time, although she proceeded without any interruption, save her own spasmodic struggles with her utterance. The candle was burning low and the girl on the box was snoring heavily when Mrs. Wisby had concluded, and had with increasing difficulty reached out her long, thin hand from the bed towards the visitor, in token of good faith.

He hesitated for an instant, and then touched her hand with his.

"I believe you," he answered ; "but why did you not let me know that this man had over-reached you? I could have swept him from my path, a thing that was dangerous, and had not a right to live. You should have put me on my guard, woman."

"I was too much afeard on you, George," answered the feeble voice, "and he swore he meant no harm, but was a friend of yourn."

"Curse him!" cried Carr, with an angry stamp of his foot upon the floor. "I will repay his friendship in his own coin, and have no mercy on the skulking hound! He could not trust in Nella, but must give her up, thinking that she would not suspect him, and that for ever afterwards he would be safe from spies. Great heaven, what a weak wretch and reasoner he is! He meets me on my way to London, and sees the beginning of fresh trouble in my search for you; we come together into this room, and I listen to his warning!"

"To think that you should—have played one of your old tricks—upon me too," croaked forth Mrs. Wisby; "you who were allers—the artfullest of coves! A pity it is that you ever throwed up—the perfession, and dropped the lot on us—for a credit to the school you was. What made you come lump-

ing in here with that box, and with—all the lies about it being swag ? ”

“ I thought they would tell me that you were not living in this place if I came here with inquiries ; that they had your orders to deceive me. I thought to find you strong and full of craft yourself, not the poor, dying, miserable wretch you are.”

“ Not dying, George—not dying ! ” said the old woman, with intense eagerness, and the light in her eyes appeared to bear testimony to her own assertion. “ You’d be glad to think so, pr’aps—lots of people would be glad to think so, who I’ll pay out for all the dodges they’ve played when I was ill ; but there’s life in the old ’ooman for years yet, I tell you.”

“ Try and think there is not,” said George Carr sternly. “ It may be better for you in the end, and even to you may come some kind of sorrow for all the evil of your life.”

“ Yes, I’m sure to think like that ; that’s Mrs. Wisby’s style exac’y,” was the ironical reply ; “ that would cheer her up too, wouldn’t it ? No, no, old comrade ; I’ll think of getting better. You’re narvous about the ketching in my throat. It’s a drag upon me, but—he, he !—it’s not the death-rattle, George ; we haven’t come to that.”

“ I think you have,” was the blunt assertion.

"I ought to know best how I feel, I s'pose," said Mrs. Wisby snappishly, "and I feel better, stronger by—a long chalk than I did this morning. You can't frighten me to death, and please the lor you haven't—come to kill me for all that young swell found out about you."

"I have no reckoning to make with you," he said.

"What are you a-staying for?"

"I don't know," was the listless answer. "I'm tired, and want rest. I have nowhere else to go, save Vates Street," he added scornfully, "and this is home."

"Good lor, to hear you talk like this because your daughter's lagged! How long has she got, George?"

"Six years altogether."

"A tidy stretch; but then she's young, and you're as strong as a bullock; you'll wait for one another. I don't see what there is—to fret about at all."

"No, I suppose you don't."

"If they send her on to the London prisons—which they're sure to do—why, she'll have a pal in Sally—who'll soon find her out—and be company for her. Now to think that those two—born and bred in Wisby's School a'most—should meet agin in quod!"

"Silence, you hag!" shouted Carr, with a force that echoed through the house, and awoke the girl sleeping on the box, who struggled out of sleep and half-raised herself upon her elbows to look wildly round her through the hair that hung about her face. "Don't talk like that to me," cried Carr, in a voice trembling with passion, "don't remind me of her misery, for I am dangerous! I tell you that I am not to be trusted with myself, and that I have a hell burning here," striking his breast, "which only a great revenge can satisfy!"

"You're making a—fine noise," grumbled Mrs. Wisby, "but then you—was allers noisy. I say," she added confidentially, "what shall you do to him?"

He did not answer. He rose and walked heavily across the room, with the eyes of the sick woman and her nurse watching him; he turned and walked back again; he continued to pace to and fro with his hands behind him, and his face bent downwards in deep thought.

"I can't abide that, George," said the faint voice of Mrs. Wisby in remonstrance, "it makes my head swim. I wish you'd leave me to myself. All last night I hadn't a bit of sleep for this—cussed ketching in my throat, and now that I feels I might shut my eyes a bit, I'm dashed if you—will let me."

"I shall wait till the daylight," said he doggedly. "Here is the old school where I first learned my lessons, and called you mother, and I am home at last."

"I don't know that I'm glad to see you then," replied Mrs. Wisby, with a wistful look at him, "for I can't make you out, unless you are 'arf mad, which is more than like—ly. You came here to kill me, George—didn't you now?"

"To find out why you played me false, and then to judge what revenge I should take. I don't think that such a life as yours would have satisfied me."

"You don't mean me harm now you've said so, and I've told you all—the truth?"

"I believe you, for I see the whole plot against my Nella, and it is hideous and cowardly in the light which shines upon it. By heaven! I will go at once, and——"

He had rushed to the door, where he paused with his great brown hand upon it.

"No, no, I'll think this over to the end, and do nothing rashly," he said, returning to the room. "I am not likely to alter my mind in this matter, and this serpent who has stung me I will crush systematically beneath my heel."

Mrs. Wisby listened with eager attention, although there seemed a greater difficulty in under-

standing him. She appeared anxious that he should leave her to herself; but he lingered with strange persistency, as though, in the gloomier thoughts that had come to him, he loved the old dark haunts. He had called the place home, and he clung to it like home, in the bitterness and blackness of a disappointment which he could not bear.

He sat down again, and Mrs. Wisby looked at him till she dozed off into an odd, spasmodic sleep, wherein she struggled harder for breath with every minute, and made hideous noises in her throat that kept Kitty wakeful, though they did not appear to disturb the deep train of thought into which George Carr had plunged.

Kitty got off the box at last, and propped up Mrs. Wisby's head, and Mrs. Wisby opened wide her eyes, and asked, in a voice that had grown more husky since her sleep, what she was doing that for.

"You're making sich a row," said Kitty, "I thought your head had slipped."

"You're arter that suverin, you are, you rat," was the harsh whisper given back.

"I aint. I don't want it—I aint a-thinking of it."

"You'd better not be; it'll be the very wust game that ever you—played me, Kitty. Where's George Carr?"

"Why, there he is, a-setting beside you still."

"Oh, is he? I thought he'd gone. Don't leave me with him."

"I'm not a-going to leave you," answered Kitty peevishly, and then she went back to the box and flung herself full length upon it once more. A long silence ensued in the room, broken alone by Mrs. Wisby's heavy breathing, until George Carr felt his arm pulled by the girl, who had leaned forwards to touch him.

"Well—what is it?" he asked.

"Is she a-talking right about the school? Was you ever one of us, really?"

"I was," answered Carr.

"And your daughter too?"

"Yes."

"And who's this Sally that the missus is allers flinging in one's teeth?" said the girl jealously. "Could she have done more than I have for her, or put up with her tantrums more, I should like to know? And yet it's nothink but Sally, and how she would have stood by her if she'd been out of prisin."

"If I had cut that girl's throat down in Deene-ford, if I had only found her, it would have all been well enough; but link by link one miserable chain of complication down to this."

"What are you a-jawing about now? I axed you who Sally was?"

"A girl trained up to theft as you have been; who went on at the old rate, and with no one to cry 'Stop.' I might have saved her once, but it was not my business, and so I let her go, and it was she who brought about this downfall. Why, that is retribution," he muttered to himself.

"You're a rum customer, and no mistake," said Kitty, shrugging her shoulders as she gave up all attempt to understand him. "No wonder the old missus isn't sweet on you. I say, she was not sich a bad un, was she? Sharp at times when we didn't treat her fair, or made too much game on her as she grew old and rickety, but she never blowed the gaff, sir, and so I sees her out."

"With me—we two thieves together, Kitty, will do honour to the last moments of the mistress."

"You're a bit of a play-actor, I fancy," said Kitty, regarding him furtively.

"Why?"

"You don't seem exac'ly to say what you mean—like them coves on the stage, you know," the girl explained.

"If I were to say all that is in my thoughts you would go shrieking with horror from this room,"

said Carr. "Why do you trouble me like this? Cannot you see that I want to think?"

"All right."

Another long silence, the candle burning towards its socket in the ginger-beer bottle, the old woman close on death, and defiant still of the great enemy—or the great friend, which is it?—breathing with greater difficulty, pausing at times for so long a period that the suspension of her breath caused both those watchers to glance towards her quickly, thinking that it was at last all over with her.

Suddenly she opened her eyes, and glared before her as at an unseen witness of her death-struggle who confronted her.

"I never turned aginst—a pal—in all—my—life," she murmured. "I was true to the school I started—s'elp me—allers. Ask George Carr—he's somewhere here about, sir—in the dark. George," she wailed forth, "speak up for me. Where—are you?"

"I am here—cannot you see me?"

"No—not you, but I can the tother one—there, by the foot of the bed, George. Send it away—swear at it and skeer it off—please."

George Carr was very strange that night; it was no marvel that those whom he encountered regarded

him with grave astonishment. He leaned over the grey-haired sinner, and held the hand again which had remained outside the coverlet since it had been last extended to him.

"Mother Wisby," he said to her, in a low, clear voice, "say 'The Lord have mercy on me and forgive me.'"

"What for?"

"You have not many minutes to live, and to meet your Maker with a regret upon your lips may stand for something and atone for much. I wouldn't have *him* die even, without saying that," he muttered to himself.

"I'm not a-going—to die. Where am I? What's that gal put—the light out—for? I'm ony—going to—sleep a—bit!"

She closed her eyes, and then half-started up in bed and fell back again, fighting for her breath, and for a few moments more of her awfully mis-spent life.

George Carr was bending over her, when the girl Kitty touched his arm.

"This is the ketching, guv'nor, which worrits her so much, and makes me split my sides a-larfing sometimes to see her kick the clothes about. This is—— Oh, 'pon my soul, I think she's going off in earnest now! I don't like this—at all!"

And the girl, awed by the solemnity of Death, crouched down by the bedside, and turned away her head.

"Is it all over?" she whispered after awhile, and when the room was very still.

"Yes, it is all over," answered George Carr. "She has gone."

"If I didn't think so. Are you off?"

"Yes—I have seen the last of the principal, and have nothing to stay for."

"Dashed if I'm a-going to stay by myself then," cried the girl. "I'll come with you—anywheres. You are one of us, you know, and won't turn your back upon a pal."

"Don't follow me," said Carr moodily; but as he went out of the room and down the stairs, the girl followed like his shadow.

At the landing-place on the next floor he paused in the darkness, and said—

"I'm going a long journey presently, and you can't go with me."

"Why not?"

"I wish to be alone."

"I can't go up there jest yet—I'll come into the street a bit."

"Do, and I'll go up-stairs again and have a search," said Carr thoughtfully. "There must be

money about, and I've as much right to that sovereign the swell gave her as anybody, I suppose?"

The girl was deceived by this remark at once.

"Oh, no, you haven't," cried Kitty, all eagerness once more, and already backing her way towards the room she had quitted in her fear. "You don't want it, and aint so hard up as I am. I won't come arter you. I aint afeard to stay till the morning. What's there to be afeard on? You let me be to mind her."

She went stealthily and swiftly backwards, talking all the time, and the instant afterwards the door where the dead woman lay was banged to noisily, and locked upon the man who had spoken of his claim to Mrs. Wisby's money. Meanwhile, George Carr went down-stairs and out of the house, closing the door softly after him. There were two men in Vates Street as he emerged therein, and he nodded to them as he passed, and whistled a low note, which one of them repeated, and then asked his companion who that was. His companion did not know, and the stranger had gone too far down Vates Street for them to think it worth their while to follow him, and inquire what game was up to-night. He went on, threading his way through the maze of streets, a man who knew each turning well, and had business of importance to complete ere the sun rose upon another day.

BOOK IV.—THE CRISIS.

CHAPTER THE FIRST.

THE DEEPENING OF THE SHADOW.

It was five or six days after Mrs. Wisby had departed this life, deeply regretted by a large circle of friends and acquaintances, that Horace Essenden came on horseback into Deeneford once more, and rode swiftly towards the rectory of the Reverend Theobald Gifford. The few who noticed him as he rode into the village that wintry-looking afternoon, thought that the young squire was in a great hurry, and had not spared his steed much if he had come from Kliston in that fashion; and a fewer number, but of more powers of observation, said that he looked pale and anxious, as though trouble had met him, or he was taking trouble to others whom he might have wished to spare. It was noticed by this latter body, who were curious as well as observant, that he passed the villa of his lady-love

without taking any heed of it, and made direct for the establishment of the clergyman, who had left for London only twenty-four hours since; and one man, more curious than the rest, who had run fifty yards down the road to see the upshot of it all, asserted at the Deeneford Inn that young Mr. Essenden must have been drinking too much port wine that day to have reeled so unsteadily from his saddle towards the front door of the rectory.

Horace Essenden had certainly reeled a little across the path, and appeared to be recovering himself before he knocked at the door, for he remained a few moments passive there, bending his riding-whip between his hands in a nervous, irritable manner that was new to his character.

The door opened before he had made up his mind to knock, or had sufficiently composed himself, and the maid-servant said—

“I said it was you, sir, but Miss Gifford told me that I must be mistaken.”

“Miss Gifford,” he replied, with a wild stare at the servant. “Where is your mistress, then?”

“Mrs. Gifford is in the village, I believe, sir. Oh, Mr. Essenden, nothing has happened, I hope?”

“Happened, girl. What is to happen?” he replied peevishly. “Is there anything very remarkable in my asking to see your mistress?”

"No, sir, certainly not. I beg your pardon, sir," answered the abashed maid.

"In the village. What part of the village?" he asked quickly.

"I don't know, sir. Will you not step in, and ask Miss Gifford?"

"Miss Gifford," he said again, as though he had once more forgotten that she was a visitor at her brother's house; "yes, to be sure. Will you see that some one looks to my horse for a few moments? I shall not stay long."

He passed her, and went at once, unannounced, into the drawing-room, keeping his hat on in that new absent manner which had already perplexed the domestic. Augusta Gifford rose from her seat by the fireside to welcome him; there was a smile of welcome on her face, too, which showed that her heart had, perhaps, grown fonder in his absence; but it was speedily quenched when it met with no return from him.

"Horace, what is the matter?" was her first question.

"Nothing is the matter," answered Horace, "unless it is with my looks, which appear to frighten everybody to-day. What is there in my face, I wonder, to scare everybody whom I meet?"

He went to the glass above the mantelpiece to

examine it for himself, discovered that he wore his hat still, removed it in some confusion, sat down before the fire, laid his riding-whip across his knees, and spread his hands towards the blaze, as though he were very cold after his long ride.

Miss Gifford looked at him attentively, and said, after awhile—

“Have you returned to Deeneford for good, Horace?”

“N—no; oh, no,” he answered; “business of importance connected with my aunt Martin—papers to find and to take back to London at once, that is all.”

“Have you been successful in your search for your brother?”

“Yes; he is in London, I believe. He has been seen—at least, I think my aunt has seen him. I don’t know exactly.”

He sat and stared at the fire after this, until Augusta startled him once more by resting her hand lightly on his arm.

“Horace,” she said, “it is useless to disguise that there is something affecting your mind, and rendering you unlike yourself. I know you far too well not to see that there is a difference in your manner to-day. If you have brought me bad news, I am now prepared for it.”

"I have not brought any news, Augusta. Don't cross-question me, for mercy's sake!"

"You are ill. Oh, something has happened! Why seek to disguise it from me with a face like that?"

"It is all fancy," he murmured; "I assure you, Augusta, that it is all fancy."

"I am bound to believe you," replied she slowly. "I do not think that you would tell me a falsehood, or consider that you were justified in withholding from me anything of importance to myself or those I loved. Possibly I am fanciful to-day. You left my brother well?"

"Quite well, Augusta. Everybody quite well," he said, with an alacrity that he hoped would dispel all doubts, "and only myself tired a little with a journey made in haste to save time. I return to London to-night."

"Indeed. Why this hurry?"

"A—a whim of my aunt's. She grows excitable, and desires that some papers should be brought to her without delay. Where is Mrs. Gifford?"

"The curate's wife, Mrs. Small, is ill, and she has gone to sit with her."

"Indeed, I am sorry to hear that. Mrs. Small always seemed to be a delicate woman, and one likely to break up at any moment. Small's house is

in an out-of-the-way place. How is Mrs. Gifford to get back ? ”

“There is no one likely to molest her by the way in Deeneford. The place is not half a mile from here.”

“Not by the cross path through the shrubbery, but it is too late for her to return by that route. The night falls early in the November months. Why, the twilight will be soon upon us.”

He seemed to shudder at the thought of it, and meeting Miss Gifford’s gaze still directed to him, he rose and shook himself in dog-like fashion.

“I must go, Augusta,” he said, “or I shall never catch that train from Kliston to-night. You will excuse this unnecessary haste, but Mrs. Martin is old, and I am her heir and must study her wishes.”

“You speak ironically, Horace.”

“There, there, Augusta, I am in a very bad temper, and that accounts for everything,” he said very hurriedly. “I don’t like these long journeys—motiveless journeys, I might almost call them; and my last poem has been cut up unmercifully by the critics, who tell me that I play on one note and write rhyme, not poetry. You see that I have had a little to try me, and possibly my natural good-temper has given way a little. Good-bye.”

He held both hands towards her, and looked at

her in so strange a manner, that she made one more effort to beat down the mystery in which he appeared to have enshrouded himself. She laid her hands within his own, and said—

“When shall I see you again, Horace?”

“I don’t know—I can’t say,” he stammered.

“I hope to be in London myself in two or three days, to assist my brother in poor Nella Carr’s cause.”

“Ah, poor Nella Carr! If things had only remained as they were, and she had been left to herself, how much better for us all!”

“What do you mean by that, Horace?”

“I don’t know what I mean; I wander a little again. Forgive me, and good-bye.”

“Horace,” she said, detaining his hands as he made an effort to withdraw them, “why will you not confide in me? If we stand not in our old positions towards each other”—she looked down here, and a lover despairing of pardon might have taken new hope to his heart from her shyness—“still we are friends, and you might trust in me to give you help in that which I am sure is troubling you, despite all protestations to the contrary. Trust in me as in a sister, and do not leave me a prey to anxiety.”

“Augusta,” he said nervously, “I have nothing

to tell you, nothing that I dare tell a woman like you."

"Very well."

She released her hands from his and turned away. He hesitated once more, and then followed her to the chair into which she had dropped, a pale and dignified woman, whose feelings were wounded, but were for ever after that rebuff to be disguised from him.

"Augusta, I can't tell you," he cried. "They will tell you soon enough. It will all be known to-morrow or the next day, and you will be taught to think the very worst of me. You alone will have the right to do that, for I have deceived you too long—acted the hypocrite and fool too successfully. Try to forgive me—remember that this has been the one struggle of my life, and that I am beaten under-foot at last."

He wrung her hands in his again, and then dashed from the room, not heeding her wild cry for him to stay, to explain further all that he meant by that last outburst of passion; and the instant afterwards he was in his saddle and galloping away from her.

Augusta sat with her hands pressed to her temples, trying to think of all that he had said to her—all that his words had implied in the headlong fury with which they had been hurled forth, and the

grim truth seemed to steal towards her slowly, and lay its icy clutch upon her heart-strings.

"He—he loves her still," she whispered to herself, "and she may be aware of it, and has never, never cared for Theo! Oh, if I could think quietly of this for a few minutes, if it were not wicked to believe it for an instant!"

She rocked herself as with pain in her chair, and the servant entering, stood in amazement at the door.

"Oh, my dear Miss 'Gusta," she ejaculated, "and what is the matter with you too? Is master ill, or dead, please?"

"No, no. What have you come in for?"

"I thought the fire was burning low, and that Mrs. Gifford would soon be back again."

"Yes, she will soon be back," repeated Augusta. "Can you remember if Mr. Essenden asked for her or me when he first called?"

"For her, ma'am."

"Did he?" she said quietly. "Mr. Gifford must have entrusted him with a message to deliver."

She went slowly out of the room, and more slowly up-stairs, holding the hand-rail as though she dragged herself with difficulty to her room, where she put on her bonnet and shawl, and then dropped at the bed's foot to pray, with her trembling hands spread before her face.

"I can't think it—I can't believe it for an instant," she said, when she was descending the stairs, "and I will ask Laura to forgive me for all my unjust suspicions of her. I will go and meet her at once."

She passed out of the house unnoticed, and went with faltering steps along the carriage-drive and through the gates into the high road. The twilight was creeping over the landscape. Horace Essenden was right; in the November months the night falls early, and he who would work in the daylight must be chary of his time.

END OF VOL. II.





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